

Life of
The Venerable
Thomas-à-Kempis,
By

Dom Vincent Scully, O.R.L.





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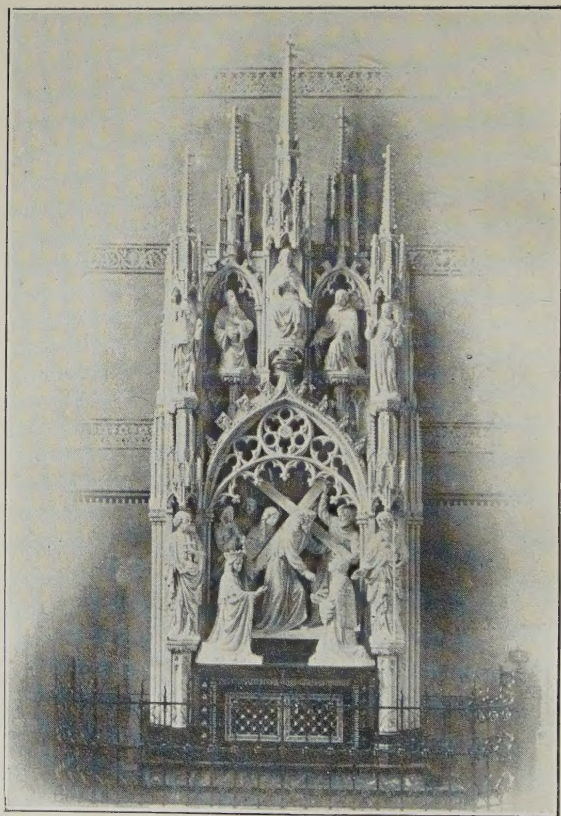
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LIFE OF THE
VENERABLE THOMAS À KEMPIS



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MONUMENT TO THOMAS À KEMPIS AT ZWOLLE, HOLLAND.

Frontispiece

L I F E
OF THE
VENERABLE THOMAS À KEMPIS

Canon Regular of St. Augustine

BY
DOM VINCENT SCULLY, C.R.L.

WITH INTRODUCTION BY SIR FRANCIS CRUISE, M.D.

(PERMISSU SUPERIORUM)

'Laudemus viros gloriosos et parentes nostros in generatione sua'

ECCL. xliv. 1



R. & T. WASHBOURNE
18 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON
BENZIGER BROS.: NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, AND CHICAGO

1901

F
37.5
14

Nihil Obstat.

GULIELMUS CANONICUS GILDEA, S.T.D.,

Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur.

✠ HERBERTUS CARDINALIS VAUGHAN,

Archiep. Westmonast.

Die 26 Januarii, 1901.

100427

To
ALL LOVERS
OF
À KEMPIS AND 'THE IMITATION,'
THIS LITTLE WORK
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
BY
THE AUTHOR.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IN offering this simple biography of the Venerable à Kempis to the public, I am influenced chiefly by the desire to make those among them who love and study 'The Imitation of Christ' familiar with the life and surroundings of its saintly author.

Now, the admirers of the 'Imitation' may be divided into two classes: those who are convinced that Thomas wrote the work, and those who are not. To the former any additional knowledge of the holy Canon's life and spirit must be always welcome. To the latter I can present this little sketch with the full assurance that at least they will find nothing therein to confirm them in their doubt. However, as a matter of fact, there are very few in England who favour the French or Italian rivals of à Kempis, while, on the other hand, the most powerful works in his defence have been written in our tongue.

Hence I have judged it neither needful nor expedient to treat of this vexed question in the body of the present work, especially as in the heat of controversy one is so apt to lose sight of the personality of him whose rights are being vindicated.

But, as there still exist many who would consider

no work on à Kempis complete which did not contain some reference to the authorship of Thomas's masterpiece, I have asked Sir Francis Cruise, M.D., whose last essay on the subject is still unanswered, being, in fact, unanswerable, to write a few lines on the vexed question. In spite of his multifarious and absorbing professional duties, this eminent physician, who undoubtedly ranks with the first among the modern defenders of à Kempis, most willingly acceded to my request. To him my best thanks are due not only for this kindness, but also for the spontaneous offer, gratefully accepted, of the blocks of the photo of à Kempis and of the monument erected in his honour.

In conclusion, I must thank those other kind friends who have aided me in this labour of love, especially the Very Rev. Pastoor of Zwolle, Dean von Balen, and Mr. J. M. W. Waanders of the same town for their kindness in sending me a pamphlet containing an account of the à Kempis monument, which forms the frontispiece, and of which a description is given in the last chapter of this work. Beautiful photos of the same may be obtained from Mr. Waanders, who kindly, and unsolicited, presented me with a copy.

SPETTISBURY, 1901.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

T is time, assuredly, that a satisfactory biographical sketch of the great Thomas à Kempis, the author of 'The Imitation of Christ,' should be placed in the hands of the public.

Father Vincent Scully has accomplished this in the present essay, and most certainly it will be welcomed by the world at large, which, above and regardless of all sectarian differences, accepts the 'Imitation,' in the words of Fontanelle, as the most beautiful book that ever came from the hand of man—for, as we know, the Holy Scriptures come from God.

Beyond doubt it most perfectly reflects the light which Jesus Christ brought down from heaven to earth, and truthfully portrays the highest Christian philosophy. When our Divine Saviour preached the Sermon on the Mount He held up as the characteristics of His followers—perfect humility, poverty of spirit, purity of heart, meekness, sorrow for sin, forgiveness of injuries, and peace and joy in the midst of tribulation and persecution. Where else do we find these doctrines so incisively and persuasively taught as in the 'Imitation'? In this one book, as Dean Milman says, 'was gathered and concentrated all that was elevating, passionate, profoundly pious, in

all the older mystics,' and no one ever could resist its power, 'its short, quivering sentences, which went at once to the heart.'

How and why, it may be asked, was the author able to compass within the covers of this slender volume so much wisdom, such vast spiritual experience, poetry, and profound philosophy? Such is the question put by the late Brother Azarias, in his essay on 'Culture of the Spiritual Sense,' wherein he gives us the most perfect and beautiful analysis of the 'Imitation' ever written. Let me quote his reply:

'Here is the secret of the magic influence wielded by the "Imitation." Pick it up when or where we may, open it at any page we will, we always find something to suit our frame of mind. The author's genius has such complete control of the subject, and handles it with so firm a grasp, that in every sentence we find condensed the experience of ages. It is humanity finding in this simple man an adequate mouthpiece for the utterance of its spiritual wants and soul-yearnings. And his expression is so full and adequate because he regarded things in the white light of God's truth, and saw their nature and their worth clearly and distinctly, as divested of the hues and tints flung around them by passion and illusion.'

The question of the authorship of this wondrous book has been the subject of one of the most extraordinary controversies known in the history of literature, and it is upon this subject Father Scully asks me to say a few words.

No more difficult task could fall to the lot of anyone

than an attempt to condense into a few pages the discussion of a topic which has given birth to some hundreds of volumes, many lengthy, though solid, and others still lengthier, and of less value than the paper on which they were written.

The work of such leisure time as I could steal from an arduous professional life has been devoted to this labour of love, and has led me, and I believe will lead all truthful studious minds, to the conviction, despite vexatious controversy, that Thomas à Kempis *was* the author of 'The Imitation of Christ.'

It is but natural that the biographer of such a man as Thomas à Kempis, immersed in the study and portrayal of his holy life and wondrously charming personality and surroundings, should seek to avoid the uncongenial task of opening up the strange controversy which, in one fashion or another, has ever striven to rob the great Canon Regular of St. Augustine of his rightful honours. The fire and smoke of polemics, not always redolent of charity or veracity, became inevitably revolting to him, and hence, I suppose, he turns to me to discuss this painful topic.

It was in the nature of things that an author whose motto was: 'Love to be unknown and valued as nothing,' should put forth his book anonymously; and such was the custom with the members of the Congregation of Windesheim, to which Thomas à Kempis belonged, and of which he was the great literary exponent. Certain it is that the 'Imitation' so appeared, in the early part of the fifteenth century, and, in the prevailing ignorance as to its origin, was attributed to very many different spiritual writers; especially St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure,

Thomas Gallus, Henry de Kalcar, Rudolph of Saxony, Ubertinus de Cassalis, Innocent III., Rainaluzzi, John Tambaco, John Charlier de Gerson, the mighty Chancellor of the University of Paris, and John à Kempis, the elder brother of Thomas.

As time rolled on the light of truth pierced and dissipated the mists of obscurity, and all these claimants sank into oblivion.

Early in the seventeenth century a certain mythical candidate, *who never existed*, was introduced upon the stage, and most powerful influence brought to bear to favour his supposed pretensions. This was the supposititious John Gersen of Vercelli, an imaginary Benedictine Abbot.

Of latter days, when Time and Truth have thrashed out the question, the only candidates for the authorship of the 'Imitation' recognised by critics are: Thomas à Kempis, John Charlier de Gerson, and the above-mentioned myth, Gersen of Vercelli.

A full exposition of the positions of these candidates would be utterly impossible on the present occasion; but I would venture to refer all interested in this subject to a short essay published for me by the Catholic Truth Society of England in 1898,* which is really an epitome of a more elaborate work which appeared in 1887.†

I believe anyone who studies these works carefully must come to the conclusion :

1. That Thomas à Kempis *was* the author of the 'Imitation ;'

* 'Who was the Author of "The Imitation of Christ"?' by Sir F. R. Cruise, M.D. London: Catholic Truth Society, 1898.

† 'Thomas à Kempis,' etc., by F. R. Cruise, M.D. London; Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1887.

2. That John Charlier de Gerson was not and could not have been its author ; and

3. That the so-called John Gersen of Vercelli never existed at all.

A few wild theorists, careless or ignorant of the demonstrable claims of à Kempis, and following the methods of their kind, familiar in all ages, have put forward the idea that none of the claimants mentioned produced the 'Imitation,' but that its author is unknown, and of date anterior to à Kempis.

In corroboration of this assertion they do not bring forward one single particle of evidence. The principal sponsors of these vagaries are :—

The anonymous author of an essay known as the 'Septem motiva contra Thomam de Kempis,' M. Tamizey de Larroque, and M. Arthur Loth.

For wild, baseless speculation I can commend these writers very strongly.

As already stated, it would not be possible to elucidate fully the question of the authorship of the 'Imitation' in this brief note, but I venture to reproduce a summary of the conclusions to which I have been drawn, as contained on the last page of my essay of 1898. In conclusion, I may here quote the remark made recently to me by M. Leopold Delisle, Director of the National Library in Paris, and one of the most erudite critics of our time : 'For the learned who have studied and understand this subject the controversy is at an end, and in favour of Thomas à Kempis.'

SUMMARY

THOMAS A KEMPIS.

(Born 1379 or 1380; died 1471.)

I.

Contemporary Witnesses.

From amongst a crowd I have quoted fourteen, of whom two knew him personally, and three were members of his own order, and therefore representatives of the domestic tradition which attributed the authorship to a Kempis long before any controversy arose.

II.

External Evidence of Manuscripts.

A large portion of the most ancient and trustworthy manuscripts, many dating during his life, and one in his own handwriting, point to him as the author.

III.

Internal Evidence.

In favour of a Kempis we find—

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) Identity of Style; including peculiarities, viz.— | Common to the 'Imitation' and other works of a Kempis. |
| (a) Barbarisms. | |
| (b) Italianized words. | |
| (c) The word <i>devotus</i> used in a peculiar sense. | |
| (d) Dutch idioms. | |
| (e) Systematic rhythmical punctuation. | |
- (2) The 'Imitation,' in part derived, word for word, from the writings of the 'School of Windesheim,' of which a Kempis was the leading exponent.
- (3) Also copiously derived from the Scripture, and the works of St. Bernard, with both of which we know a Kempis was *especially* familiar.

JOHN CHARLIER DE GERSON.

(Born 1363; died 1429.)

I.

Contemporary Witnesses.

Not one to be found in his favour. Two (his brother and Ciresio) *negatively* adverse by their silence. Five, shortly after his time, testify *positively* against him.

II.

External Evidence of Manuscripts.

Not a single manuscript dated during his life, or for thirty years after his death, assigns the authorship to him.

III.

Internal Evidence.

Unfavourable to him in every point.

JOHN GERSEN,

Benedictine Abbot of Vercelli.

HYPOTHESES

Of the author of the 'Septem Motiva,' of De Larroque and Loth.

Existence wholly mythical. Claims to the authorship of the 'Imitation,' unsustained by one particle of evidence. Purely speculative, and full of obvious mistakes and erroneous statements.

F. R. CRUISE, M.D.

LIST OF AUTHORITIES CONSULTED IN THE COMPILATION OF THIS WORK

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Vol. I.: 'Sermones triginta ad Novitios,' 'Conciones et Meditationes triginta sex utilissimæ.'

Vol. II.: 'De Imitatione Christi,' 'Soliloquium Animæ,' 'De Disciplina Claustralium,' 'De Fideli Dispensatore,' 'Orationes Piæ,' 'De Mortificatione sui ipsius,' 'De Elevatione Mentis in Deum,' 'Alia Exercitia Spiritualia.'

Vol. III.: 'Vita Gerardi Magni,' 'Vita D. Florentii,' 'Vitæ Discipulorum D. Florentii,' 'Orationes admodum piæ.'

There are two other works of À Kempis not contained in this edition: the 'Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes,' which is published in one volume with that of Windesheim (see Busch), and also 'De Vita et Beneficiis Salvatoris J. C. devotissime meditationes cum gratiarum actione.' See note, p. 58.

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LIFE OF THE VENERABLE THOMAS À KEMPIS

CHAPTER I

Introductory—Gerard Groot and the ‘Modern Devotion’

IDESPREAD was the corruption, and many and grave the scandals, among both clergy and laity towards the end of the fourteenth century. But God, Who never abandons His Church, caused bright examples of holiness to shine forth in the darkness, and raised up saintly heroes to rebuke with unfaltering accents the vices of the time, and to set before a worldly generation the pattern of an Apostolic life: to recall into actual existence the purity, simplicity, and fervour of the primitive Church.

Prominent among these noble men is one whose name is but too little known to the faithful in general—Gerard Groot, or, as his name is translated into Latin, Gerardus Magnus, Gerard the Great. Born of wealthy parents in the city of Deventer, in Holland, Gerard displayed in his childhood signs of great ability and talent. As a lad of fifteen he was sent to

Paris to prosecute his studies in its famous University, and there he attained the degree of Master at the early age of seventeen. Courtied and flattered because of his wealth, affability, and learning, and loaded with ecclesiastical benefices, the young Licentiate gave himself up to a life of ease and pleasure ; a life which, if not absolutely sinful, was at least thoroughly worldly and utterly alien from his sacred profession. But the grace of God was soon to overtake him. Once while Gerard was at Cologne, witnessing some public games, a certain solitary, describing him by name and appearance, foretold that he would some day be a great light in the Church. A mutual friend, hearing of this, went to the young cleric, and said to him : ‘Why do you stand here intent upon such vanities? You are destined for higher and nobler things.’ Gerard treated these words as a joke, and thought little more of them at the time. But the hermit’s prophecy was speedily verified.

At this period, amidst the general decadence, the Carthusian Order was remarkable for its austerity and regularity, and for the number of holy and learned men that flourished in its secluded retreats. Among these was one Henry de Kalcar, Prior of the Monastery of Monichuisen, near Arnheim. This holy monk had been intimate with Gerard in his younger days, and now he ardently desired his conversion. Happening to visit Utrecht on business, and learning that his friend was in the city, De Kalcar hastened to him, greeted him as an old acquaintance, accepted the offer of his hospitality, and skilfully set his net to draw this great fish from the stream of worldly pleasure that was hurrying him on to the eternal abyss. He

discoursed with him upon the sovereign good, placed before him the rewards and the punishments of the world to come, and reminded him of the uncertainty and fleetingness of the present life. The seed fell upon good ground, and, by the grace of God, brought forth fruit a hundred-fold. Gerard announced his unalterable determination to devote himself once and for all to the service of God, and the holy Carthusian Prior went his way rejoicing.

With the thoroughness of a noble spirit that cannot brook to do a thing by halves, Groot immediately began to put into effect the good resolutions he had formed. He gave up his ecclesiastical benefices, cast off his rich garments, clothed himself as became a humble cleric, and no longer frequented the society of his former friends and companions. The change was quickly noticed and freely commented upon; people asked one another whether too much learning had not turned the poor man's head. Meanwhile, Gerard, caring little for the opinion of the world, came to the conclusion that the best means of securing the perfection at which he now aimed was to retire for a time to some cloistered retreat. Naturally enough, his choice fell upon the Convent of Monichuisen, over which presided his friend and spiritual adviser, Henry de Kalcar. Three years did he abide with these holy monks, conforming himself in every particular to the austerities of their rule of life, subduing his flesh by fasts and disciplines, and strengthening his soul by a study of the Scriptures and the holy Fathers. At the end of that period, acting on the advice of the Carthusian Brethren and of other holy men, prompted also by the zeal that was the natural outcome of his

burning love of God, Gerard left the seclusion of his cell in order to communicate to others by word and example his own appreciation of the vanities of the world, and of the necessity of leading a truly Christian and mortified life.

As a preparatory step to this end, Groot betook himself to Utrecht, and there received deacon's orders ; his humility prevented him ever taking upon himself the sublime dignity of the priesthood. Armed, then, with the permission of his Bishop, Gerard began to preach throughout the diocese—in Utrecht, Deventer, Zwolle, Kampen, Amersfort, Amsterdam, Haarlem, Gouda, Leyden, Zutphen, Delft ; clergy, religious and laity, men, women, and children, learned and ignorant, princes, magistrates, lawyers, tradesmen, servants, pilgrims, and beggars—all flocked to hear the new apostle, and listened for hours to his impassioned exhortations to repent of their sins, to despise the fleeting pleasures of the world, to lead a better life. His words bore marvellous fruit. Besides the many sinners whom he recalled to a sense of their duty, numbers of the clergy and laity placed themselves unreservedly in his hands, and under his direction began to lead lives that in simplicity, devotion, and contempt of the world rivalled those of the primitive Christians.

But it is not in the nature of things that such good should be effected without difficulties or opposition. Gerard's bold denunciation of the vices of the day procured for him many powerful adversaries among the clergy and the people. His actions were calumniated, his words misrepresented, his disciples in many places persecuted and reviled. But the evil

element seemed to have gained its final triumph when, by means of slander and falsehood, an order was obtained from the Bishop forbidding Groot to preach. Doubtless it was a heavy blow, but Gerard, recognising the will of God in the ordinance of his superiors, quietly submitted and speedily silenced the rising complaints and murmurs of his followers. The zealous deacon had now more leisure to devote to that other work, which indeed was quite sufficient to occupy the attention and to engage the energies of any ordinary man—the task of directing the numerous souls that looked to him for spiritual guidance. At the same time he laid the foundations of an institute which was destined to assume immense proportions and to exert an influence for good far exceeding the most sanguine hopes of the great, but humble, Gerard.

His principal favourites amongst those that frequented his house at Deventer for advice and instruction were the poor clerical students who attended the public school in the town. These Gerard loved to gather round him, in order to discourse with them on the welfare of their souls, and to inspire them with some of those sentiments of love and zeal that filled his own great heart. Moreover, that they might be provided with the means of subsistence, and so be prevented from wandering elsewhere in search of the necessities of life, he set them portions of the Scriptures and of the Fathers to transcribe in their leisure time; and for this work he paid them well out of his own abundant patrimony. In this way quite a large number of young clerics and laymen had gathered round Gerard, each earning his own livelihood, but

all united in the bonds of fraternal charity, and all striving to live up to that high standard of Christian perfection to which they were incited by the burning words and holy example of their beloved patron and master.

As yet, however, these devout men were not living in one community. Indeed, Gerard does not seem to have thought of bringing them more closely together until it was suggested to him by one of his most trusted friends and disciples, Florence Radewyn. 'Beloved master,' said he one day, 'what harm would it be should I and these other clerics, who already manifest such goodwill, put together whatever we earn, week by week, and live in common?' At first Gerard, fearing the opposition which he foresaw this new departure would excite, demurred. Florence, however, insisted: 'What harm should we at least make an attempt? Maybe God will grant us good success.' 'In God's name, then, you may begin,' exclaimed Groot, after a moment's reflection. 'I will be your faithful advocate and protector against all who shall strive to hinder or molest you.*'

Radewyn communicated this decision to his associates, and they received the intelligence with joy. Gerard gave up his own house to the new community. In a short time a devoted band of priests, clerics, and laymen had gathered under his roof, all aiming at Christian perfection, possessing everything in common, observing silence throughout the greater part of the day, dividing their time between prayer, study, and manual labour. Their chief occupation continued to be that of transcribing manuscripts, for

* Buschius, 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. ii.

the art of printing was not yet invented, and the work of a copyist was well paid and highly prized. Beyond a few fundamental principles, these good men followed at first no rule or constitutions. All that was required was that they should live in common, be content with coarse food and poor clothing, be obedient to the Superior, usually a priest, and contribute by their individual labour to the maintenance of the house; for it was forbidden for any of them to beg. At the same time, another home was opened for pious females, who, under the guidance of a Father Confessor, adopted a mode of life in every way similar to that of the clerics, except that they did not transcribe manuscripts, but busied themselves with labour that was considered more congenial to their sex.

Such was the beginning of the institute known as that of the 'Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.' These Brothers and Sisters were also commonly known as the 'Devoti and Devotæ,' while the whole movement was designated by the term of 'The New Devotion.' Readers of the 'Imitation' will remember the frequent use of the words 'devout' and 'devotion.' The institution spread with incredible rapidity. In a short space of time nearly every town of importance in Holland and the adjacent countries contained one or more houses of the Devout Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.

It was with some anxiety that Gerard the Great observed the marvellous growth of this work under his hands. The members of his institute were bound by no vow: they were, for the most part, laymen, or clerics only in minor orders. He knew that such a

work, left to itself, would in the natural course of things soon come to naught. Other institutions of the kind had failed, and had even drawn upon themselves the ban of the Church by the abuses which they introduced. Groot foresaw that the only safeguard for the continuance of the 'Modern Devotion' lay in its approval by, and its obedience to, ecclesiastical authority, and that the surest means of securing this double object was to make it dependent upon some great religious order, already recognised in the Church, to the Superiors of which the Devout Brothers and Sisters might look for guidance and protection. This, then, was Gerard's grand idea: to revive amongst the clergy and laity the fervour, simplicity, and poverty of the days of the Apostles by means of communities, the members of which should of their own accord live together in common, being bound by no vow, but at liberty to take upon themselves the obligations of religion in any of the existing orders, and all meanwhile under the control of some canonical religious body.

While revolving these thoughts in his mind, Groot heard of the fame of Blessed John Rusbrock, who was then Prior of a house of Canons Regular at Groenendael, near Brussels, and him he resolved to consult in his perplexity. He set out, therefore, accompanied by a holy priest named John Cele, the master of the school at Deventer, and by one Gerard, a layman, who acted as their guide. Blessed Rusbrock received a Divine premonition of their intended visit, and when they arrived he recognised Groot at once, though he had never before seen him in the flesh. Influenced by his conversations with this holy

mystic, and deeply edified by all that he saw and heard at the humble Priory in the Green Valley Groenendael, Gerard the Great resolved to place his Institute under the spiritual guidance of the Augustinian Canons.

But Groot did not live to see this second part of his programme carried into execution. While he was still considering the ways and means of making a commencement, a plague broke out at Deventer. At once the holy deacon flew to the bedside of the sick and the dying, to ease their bodily sufferings by his knowledge of medicine, and especially to strengthen their souls for the dark and perilous passage to eternity. Many of Gerard's personal friends succumbed to this dread pestilence, and among others a pious and wealthy gentleman named Lambert Stuerman. Feeling his last moment approaching, Lambert sent for Groot; for he wished to bequeath to the holy Deacon all his property for that very purpose which he knew Gerard had so much at heart, the erection of a new monastery of Canons Regular. Groot promptly obeyed the summons of his dying disciple, received from his hands the gift that made possible his long-cherished project, and remained by his side until he had peacefully expired. But—such are the ways of Divine Providence—at this very moment, when the resources which he had so long desired were placed within his grasp, Gerard the Great felt the fatal poison of the plague stealing through his veins, and hastened back to his home to die.

When the precarious condition of their beloved master became known, the lamentations of the Devout

Brethren were painful to hear, their distress pitiable to behold. The dying Saint roused himself to cheer their drooping spirit. 'My dearest Brothers,' he said, 'fear not, neither let your heart be afraid; without doubt you will persevere in this good and holy life upon which you have entered. For God will not permit this lowly good work, undertaken in His name, to perish; but He will make it grow and flourish exceedingly to the abundant and far-reaching profit of Holy Church, unto the salvation of many souls. In heaven I will be of more use to you than here, and I will send you thence roses into your hearts. Nevertheless, some of you ought to enter an order approved by the Church; to these all the Devout of both sexes may then securely have recourse, seeking from them, with a sure hope of receiving, counsel, help, and protection. For those that enter such an order ought to welcome kindly all the Devout, who observe a common and Apostolic life in monasteries and congregations, and even men of goodwill, who still live in the world, to treat them considerately, to help them in their necessities, to defend them in their troubles, to protect them faithfully, and to promote their spiritual and temporal interests to the best of their ability, even as their own. For these reasons, therefore, I beg you, one and all, and in the place of God I enjoin upon you, that as soon as possible after my death you build such a monastery and choose some of your number who will most promptly accomplish and willingly execute these things and the like and greater, so that all the Devout and religious throughout this country may everywhere securely abide under the shadow of their

wing, and, liberated from the fear of the wicked, may confidently serve, without let or hindrance, the Lord of all virtues.'

Encouraged somewhat by these words, the Brothers began to question him as to which order he would have them enter, and asked whether it were that of the Carthusians. 'Not at all,' he replied. 'Though these holy men are known to lead saintly and religious lives, yet they are so much withdrawn and secluded from men that it would be impossible for all the Devout to have free access to them, as they ought to have to those their brethren.' They then mentioned the Cistercians. 'Nor may you choose this order,' he answered, 'for it is an institute passing severe, and not to be borne of all in these our days. Rather you should enter, as soon as may be and in the place which the Lord shall appoint, the Order of Canons Regular. For this order follows an easier rule, and is well adapted to all who are just able to serve God in holy religion. Neither do these canons seem to differ much from you in their way of life, except that they observe by profession and by vow that which you observe without vows, namely, charity and poverty, chastity and obedience.' After this Gerard appointed his faithful friend and fellow-labourer, Florence Radewyn, his successor as Superior of all the houses founded, or to be founded, of the Congregation of the Devout Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.*

Having thus, as it were, made his last will and testament, the holy man prepared himself for death. On the evening of the Feast of St. Bernard he saw

* Buschius, 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. v.

that Saint, to whom he entertained a special devotion, and his other great patron, St. Augustine, enter the house and stand at the foot of his bed, as if awaiting the departure of his soul. That same evening he calmly expired, August 20, A.D. 1384, in the forty-fourth year of his age.

The disciple and friend, Florence Radewyn, to whom Gerard the Great on his death-bed had thus bequeathed the government of his institute, was a man in every way worthy of the trust reposed in him. Born of opulent parents at Laerdam, a town about three miles distant from Utrecht, Florence passed through his university career at Prague with brilliant success. After he had attained his degree, he was welcomed home with effusion by his family and friends, and he soon won all hearts by the uprightness of his character and the affability of his manners. Before long the youthful master was installed as a Canon of St. Peter's, in Utrecht, and for a time he dallied with the vanities of the world, though he seems to have been singularly free from the vices and abuses of the age. When the fame of Gerard's preaching went abroad, Radewyn hastened with the rest to hear him. Groot singled him out from amidst the crowd that thronged the church, and, with the peculiar gift he possessed of adapting himself to the needs of individual souls among his audience, he delivered a sermon, every word of which went home to the heart of the young cleric. After the service Florence sought him out, and Gerard discoursed with him even as, years before, Henry de Kalcar had discoursed with himself, and with much the same effect.

The young cleric soon gave up his Canonry at

Utrecht, and accepted a poorer benefice in Deventer, in order that he might remain near his spiritual master. After a while, yielding to his advice and to the entreaties of his fellow-disciples, he consented to submit to that burden and dignity from which the great Gerard's sensitive humility had caused him to shrink. Afterwards, speaking of him, his master bore this remarkable testimony to his worth: 'Once I caused one man to be ordained a priest, and I trust that he is worthy. For the future I will be careful not to do the like again without good reason, for I see but few fit for this office.'* We have already narrated how it was at the suggestion of this holy priest that Gerard Groot instituted the common life among his followers. Florence had been the first to avail himself of the master's permission, and had immediately opened his own house to receive a community of devout clerics and laymen. With these he himself lived in common, the humblest of them all.

And now the revered and beloved Groot had departed to his reward, and Florence Radewyn found himself at the head of that great movement of which hitherto in his own eyes he had been but the lowliest disciple. Realizing the weight of the responsibility thus laid upon his shoulders, and recognising the loss which the infant institute had sustained in being so soon deprived of the voice and example of its founder, hitherto its only rule of life, Radewyn made it his first care to commit to writing for the guidance and instruction of the growing congregation those principles with which Gerard the Great had in theory and practice imbued his immediate followers. Accord-

* Thomas à Kempis, '*Vita Florentii*,' c. x., 2.

ingly, with the aid of some of his elder associates, he drew up the following regulations for the Devout Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life :

‘All were to approach as near as possible the life of the Apostles and of the primitive Church of Christ, *so that in the whole congregation there should be one heart, and that no one should consider or call anything his own.* No one should seek outside the house the cure of souls, ecclesiastical benefices, or worldly occupations for the sake of gain ; but clerics who should be found worthy would be promoted to cures that were not too lucrative. All should dwell together in chastity and poverty, and should be clad in that manner of dress which Gerard the Great had approved. No one should beg from door to door, and in order that they might not be driven to this by poverty, all should avoid idleness, and according to their abilities should transcribe books or instruct children. They were to take care that they themselves and all whom they should teach should venerate and worship God with the deepest piety. They should love their neighbour with due charity, and should assist the poor with alms according to their means. All should observe brotherly love. To their Superior or spiritual Father in all lawful and just concerns they should yield unquestioning obedience, considering that their highest merit consisted in charity and submission. All earnings accruing from their labour in common or in private they should, according to the Apostolic rule, lay at the feet of the Superior, and if perchance they left the Brotherhood they should carry nothing with them.’*

* Badius, ‘*Vita Thomas à Kempis*,’ c. ix., nn. 1, 2.

We cannot wonder that such a body should be blessed by God. In an incredibly short space of time the new congregation had spread, so contemporary writers assure us, through nearly the whole of Germany, through Friesland, Westphalia, and other provinces towards the north, and towards the south through Gelderland, Holland, Brabant, Flanders, and even into France. Moreover, the members of this institute not only established a new Congregation of Canons Regular; they also enrolled themselves in great numbers among the Carthusians, Cistercians, Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Carmelites, and wherever they went the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life carried with them their own spirit of joyous self-sacrifice and devotion. The great religious orders, which, with the honourable exception of the Carthusians and Cistercians, had fallen into a sad state of remissness and laxity, felt the beneficent influence of their holy example, and, as one writer quaintly puts it, 'the word "reformation" in connection with monasteries and individuals, before our time known in effect to very few, has now, like sweet honey, overrun the whole land in the words and deeds of all spiritual and worldly men and women.'*

But, meanwhile, Florence Radewyn was not unmindful of that solemn charge delivered by the great Gerard on his death-bed, that as soon as possible a monastery of Canons Regular should be instituted, to become in time the centre and support of the whole movement of the Modern Devotion. To this end all his zeal and energy were directed. Two years, however, passed before anything like a be-

* Buschius, '*Chron. Wind.*,' Lib. I., c. xlvi.

ginning could be made. And then the humble foundations of the first house were laid in an uncultivated tract of land near Windesheim, a small hamlet not far from Deventer. This became the mother-house of the famous Windesheim Congregation, a congregation which in Belgium alone, only sixty years after the death of Gerard Groot, possessed more than eighty well-regulated monasteries, which continued to flourish in all their primitive fervour until the devastations wrought by the so-called reformers almost eradicated it from its native soil, and which even then ceased not to produce most noble fruit in other lands, until at last it was utterly destroyed, root and branch, during the convulsions of the French Revolution.

Innumerable are the pious and learned men we owe to this double institute. Some of these were trained in their youth in the schools conducted by the Devout Brethren, as was the famous Erasmus. Others, again, flourished in the houses of the Common Life or in the monasteries of the different orders which the Brothers entered, to become therein shining lights of sanctity and erudition. But by far the greater number of those whose names have come down to posterity lived and worked among the countless Canons Regular enrolled year after year on the long list of the faithful followers of the great Gerard. Chief among these latter stands forth one who joined the Devout Brothers at the early age of twelve, only four years after the death of their founder, while his holy maxims and example were still fresh in their memory, who passed seven years of his youth in almost daily contact with the worthy successor of

Groot, Florence Radewyn, and during those seven years drank in his words, observed his actions, and breathed the atmosphere of simplicity and devotion in which he lived; who then spent the remaining seventy-two years of his long and saintly life in the retirement of the cloister among those of the Common Life that chose the more perfect part of the religious profession with their brethren the Augustinian Canons of Windesheim; and who gathered together and condensed all the spiritual wisdom of Groot, Radewyn, and their immediate disciples, and all the mysticism, piety, detachment, and perfection of the whole movement of the Modern Devotion into one little volume, that ever has been, and ever shall be, the delight and edification of all who open its wondrous pages—that marvellous little book the ‘Imitation.’

CHAPTER II

Birth and parentage of the Venerable Thomas à Kempis—His memorable journey to Deventer—He meets his brother John, and is introduced to Master Florence Radewyn and to the Brothers of the Common Life—The public school at Deventer



THOMAS HAEMERKEN, now commonly known as Thomas à Kempis, was born at Kempen, a small town in the diocese of Cologne, in the year of grace 1379.* One of the most ancient biographers of our Venerable Thomas, the erudite Jodocus Badius Ascensius, states that his native place was Kampen, in the diocese of Utrecht, and that thence he derived his name à Kempis;† but Thomas himself informs us that he came from Kempen, in the diocese of Cologne.‡

This same writer, Ascensius, devotes the first chapter of his biography to prove by examples from history, sacred and profane, the value of names in indicating and expressing the character of those whom they designate. He then proceeds in the second chapter to show how his triple name, Thomas Haemerken à Kempis, befits the subject of the present

* Amort, 'Deduct. Crit.,' p. 3. Francis Tolensis gives the date 1380.

† 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' c. cxvii., 4.

‡ 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 29.

work. His remarks are certainly very quaint, and his style is very antiquated; yet his words are not without a value of their own. They manifest to us the esteem in which à Kempis was held by his contemporaries and by the generations that immediately succeeded him, for Badius wrote about fifty years after our holy Canon's death.

Briefly, the prolix exposition of this ancient and learned author may be reduced to this: Thomas, according to the Hebrew, signifies an abyss; according to the Greek, detached, or a twin; and our Thomas was an abyss in the depths of his contemplation of the Divine perfections, a twin in the closeness of his love for God and his neighbour, and he was detached because from his earliest years he renounced all friendship with the devil, the world, and the flesh. The name *Haemerken*, which is rendered into Latin by *Malleolus*, the common designation of à Kempis with all the medieval writers, and which in English means a hammer, most truly describes him; says our author, 'because by his most holy life, his venerable companionship, his honeyed words, his sweet replies, his abundant writings, his opportune exhortations, he so bruised, broke, and crushed all the pride and malice of the world, all the allurements and follies of the flesh, all the wiles and illusions of the devil, that if we were all to imitate his life and attend to his words and writings, we should certainly triumph over these three great enemies of the human race, and should so utterly defeat them, that they would not have courage left to attack us again. Yea, also this Hammer, with his solid wisdom, so repelled with the sound of his hammer all heretics from his

writings—for he asserted naught that is ambiguous or contrary to Catholic truth—that they do not even dare to look at his works, conscious that they will not find therein aught which may be turned to suit their evil thoughts.’* Finally, Badius takes occasion of the etymology of Thomas’s native town to remind us of the number of his virtues, the extent of his learning, and of the wide range of his reading in the Scriptures and the Fathers; here the author is speaking of Kampen, but his remarks are equally true of Kempen, for the derivation of the two words is the same. Both names signify far-stretching, extensive, or capacious.

The parents of the Venerable à Kempis were named respectively John and Gertrude. Judging by their offspring, the two brothers John and Thomas, they must indeed have been a pious couple. In this world’s goods they were not rich. By some it is asserted that the mother kept a little school in the town. It is certain that the father was a mechanic, probably an artificer in metal. Kempen is still famous for its metal works. It has been conjectured from Thomas’s accurate and artistic description of the crown of St. Agnes that he must have been familiar with such work in his early days, and the family name, Haemerken, or Hammer, would point to the same conclusion. However that may be, certain it is that Thomas à Kempis, like so many other great men in Church and State, sprang from the ranks of the people, the honest and honourable poor, the brightest ornament of Christ’s bride on earth. Badius As-

* ‘*Vita Thomas à Kempis*,’ c. ii., 3.

cius* lays great stress on the early training which à Kempis received in his home, the abode of humble, unassuming, and contented poverty, and he declares that it was chiefly from the example of his parents that he learnt to appreciate Christian poverty, humility, and patience, virtues upon which Thomas in after years bestowed the highest encomiums in a little work entitled 'The Three Tabernacles.'

But perhaps the most certain proof we have of the piety of the elder Haemerkens is their willingness to allow their two sons one after the other to devote themselves to the service of God. They permitted Thomas, when but a child in his thirteenth year, to leave his home and depart for Deventer, whither his brother John had travelled some ten or twelve years before,† there to study under the guidance of the Devout Clerics of the Common Life. The parting scene must indeed have been very touching. The journey was one of over a hundred miles. Perhaps they might never see their dear child again—and, in fact, they never did. True, he was not going among utter strangers: his brother had gone to Deventer before him; but from what transpired when Thomas arrived at that town, it is evident that his parents had not heard from John for at least more than two years.

Little did the humble couple think at the time of that sorrowful parting that their modest child was destined to become the most famous man of his age, and that generations and generations would rise and bless them for their generous sacrifice in suffering

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' c. v.

† Amort, 'Deduct. Crit.,' p. 3.

their son to follow the call of God, when they might have so reasonably retained him by their side to be the comfort and support of their declining days. What an example this for so many foolish parents, who, in their selfish affection, refuse to allow their children to respond to that vocation for which both nature and grace have fitted them! Experience proves how often they reap the bitter fruits of their own short-sighted policy. The children whose lives they have ruined, instead of being, as they fondly hoped, their joy and consolation, usually become a source of intense anxiety, and not unfrequently bring their 'gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.' But, thank God! even in these days of waning faith God finds many willing to offer Him, if He demand it, their only or their best beloved. And in their case experience also proves that the Almighty is never to be outdone in generosity.

With little Thomas we will now take leave of the pious Haemerkens. We hear nothing further of them, except that they had both departed this life before the year 1402. At that time their son John, with the consent of his brother Thomas, sold the paternal homestead, and gave the proceeds for the support of the new monastery at Mount St. Agnes.*

We have no record of that long journey of the youthful à Kempis from his native town to Deventer. Most probably the greater part was accomplished on the Rhine, possibly in the company of some friend or neighbour travelling in the same direction. But of what befell him when he arrived at his destination

* Amort, 'Deduct. Crit.,' pp. 5, 27, 309.

Thomas himself is our informant.* As soon as he reached Deventer the little pilgrim made inquiries for his brother, only to learn that John had left the town two years previously, and had set out with five other Brothers of the Common Life to found their first monastery of Regulars at Windesheim. This ignorance of Thomas concerning his brother's movements is the proof to which we alluded above that the communications between the aged Haemerken and their elder son were few and far between, a circumstance which rendered the parting with their other child all the more painful, and which, consequently, greatly enhanced the value of their sacrifice. However, with the sturdy self-reliance begotten of his training in that home where, in very truth, the bread was earned by the sweat of the brow, the lad set out again and soon covered the twenty miles which separate Windesheim and the town of Deventer.

We can picture to ourselves the tenderness of that happy meeting. John had left home while Thomas was still an infant, and now he sees him standing before him, a bright and comely lad of modest demeanour and quiet ways, all eagerness to follow in his, the elder brother's, footsteps. John à Kempis was already a man of some consideration among the Devout Brethren; he was one of the chosen six who founded the new Congregation of Windesheim; and his name occurs third on the list of the Devout Clerics who first made profession of the religious life as Canons Regular; the two placed before him were priests, he was but a deacon.† He gives Thomas,

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. i., n. 2.

† 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. xiii.

therefore, a letter of introduction to Florence Radewyn, the Superior of the Devout Brethren at Deventer, with the assurance that this will secure for him a kind reception. Then, after receiving a few more words of loving encouragement and advice, the younger à Kempis takes leave of his brother, and with a light heart hastens to present himself to Father Florence. That holy priest welcomes the young lad with great kindness, and at once provides for his more immediate wants. But here we will let Thomas tell the story of his meeting with Florence Radewyn in his own words :

‘When, in the days of my youth,’ he writes, ‘I had come to Deventer in order to pursue my studies, thence I proceeded to seek out the Canons Regular at Windesheim. I found them there, and with them my brother. By his advice I was induced to address myself to Master Florence, a curate of the church of Deventer, a devout priest, and a man worthy of the deepest veneration. The fragrant odour of his fame had already spread through the upper provinces, and had inspired me with love and admiration; and striking witness was borne to his worth by the crowds of students who flocked to hear him say Mass. Any-one who heard or saw him could perceive that he was a just man; and he was acceptable to all as one who truly served God and devoutly revered our holy mother, the Church. When, therefore, I came into the presence of this venerable Father, he was moved with a feeling of tenderness towards me, and retained me for a while in his own house, gained for me admission into the school, and furnished me with such books as he thought I should require. Afterwards he

obtained for me hospitality at the house of a certain noble and devout lady, who treated me and many other clerics with great kindness.’*

Thomas then proceeds to describe the impressions he received from his first acquaintance with the Brothers of the Common Life: ‘Being thus associated with so devout a man and with his Brethren, day by day I observed and studied their holy manner of life; and I was delighted and rejoiced in their virtues and in the words of grace that fell from the lips of these humble servants of God. For never before, to my knowledge, had I seen such men, so devout and so fervent in the love of God and their neighbour; living in the world, yet no wise worldly, but seemingly devoid of all care for the things of earth. Remaining quietly at home, they diligently employed themselves in transcribing books; many hours they spent in spiritual reading and meditation; and the tedium of manual labour they relieved with ejaculatory prayers. In the morning, after matins, they proceeded to the church, and during the celebration of the Mass, presenting to God the first fruits of their lips and the aspirations of their hearts, prostrate in body, they lifted up pure hands and eyes to Heaven, and with prayers and tears besought remission of their sins through the merits of the saving Host.’†

After this glimpse into the home life, as it were, of the youthful Thomas in his new surroundings, let us take a passing glance into the school which he frequented daily during his seven years’ sojourn at Deventer. Unfortunately, beyond two slight incidents

* ‘*Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.*,’ c. i., n. 2.

† *Ibid.*

which occur in his 'Life of Florence Radewyn,' and which we will give shortly, à Kempis has left us in his writings no record or description of this academy, or of its master, John Boehm. However, we have a very full account of a similar institute at Zwolle, given us by John Busch, who received his education there, and by Thomas himself, who, when at Mount St. Agnes, became acquainted with its Rector, John Cele, the friend who accompanied Gerard Groot in his pilgrimage to Groenendael.*

From these authorities it appears that the scholars who frequented this academy at Zwolle numbered from eight hundred to a thousand. These came together from all parts of the neighbouring country : from the cities of Cologne, Treves, Utrecht and Cleves, and from the provinces of Brabant, Westphalia, Holland, Gelderland, Saxony and Frisia. Of these hundreds, such as were sufficiently wealthy provided for their own expenses ; but the poorer students—and perhaps these were in the majority—gained their livelihood by begging, or by doing some little work in their free time for one or other of the citizens. These impecunious votaries of learning John Cele taught gratis, and often, also, he provided them of his own accord with money to purchase their paper and other scholastic requirements.

But, though possessing so kind a heart, this master knew well how to inspire a salutary fear in the minds and hearts of his disciples. Vagabond scholars, and such as frequently desired to visit their homes, he banished from his lecture-halls ; they introduced a

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. lxviii.; 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 171.

disturbing element of restlessness, detrimental to the progress of the others in learning and in piety. But the point upon which Cele was most strict and severe was the preservation of purity of morals among the large and motley assemblage that had gathered round him. Any individual found faulty in this respect was commanded to stretch himself upon the floor and allow himself to be flogged by the whole school; expulsion was the only alternative.

The most proficient students helped the more backward in their studies, and John Cele had also two under-masters to assist him. The principal subjects taught were grammar, logic, ethics, and philosophy. Under these heads was comprised all that was then necessary in a preparatory course for the Universities. The success of Cele's tuition was shown in the numbers that passed from his hands to Paris, Prague, and elsewhere, obtained their degrees, and afterwards became themselves famous teachers of men. But John Cele, the friend, admirer, and disciple of Gerard Groot, strove to educate the heart as well as the head. On festivals, in the morning after matins, he would explain the Epistle of the day to his scholars, discoursing with them for the space of an hour; at mid-day he would devote another hour to an able exposition of the Gospel of the feast; and in the evening again he would expound some portion of the Scriptures or of the works of the Fathers. It was then that he impressed upon his youthful audience the transitory nature of the glory of the world, and the happiness of giving to God a whole-hearted service and of despising all earthly things for His sake. Many a vocation was the result

of these exhortations, and the surrounding monasteries of Canons Regular, Benedictines, Carthusians, and Cistercians could point to many of their members who had studied under John Cele at Zwolle, and who had caught from his spirit, in those discourses of his on the festivals of the Saints, a true appreciation of the comparative value of this world and the next.

Perhaps it was on these feast days that the master and his school were seen at their best. John Cele chose from his younger scholars such as had sweet and musical voices, and seated with these in the choir, he sang the vespers and the other offices of the day. The rest of the students were gathered together in a body outside the sanctuary. All were well under the watchful eye of their zealous preceptor, and anything approaching irreverence was speedily noticed and severely punished. Cele especially insisted on the modesty of their attire when assisting at these services. The holy man himself took the greatest delight in the beautiful ceremonies of the Church; à Kempis tells us that 'he joyously ruled the whole choir with harmonious concord, and often also on festivals played with exultation upon the organ, becoming a true imitator of King David, who, leaping and dancing, played the cithern before the Ark of God.'

We have said that the school at Deventer was in most respects like the academy of Zwolle; we might have added that the Rector at Deventer, John Boehm, was very similar in character to the Rector at Zwolle, John Cele. In him we note the same kindness of heart towards the poorer scholars, the same strictness in maintaining discipline, and the same love of the

services of the Church, and the same zeal for their due performance. These characteristics we gather from the little that Thomas has left us concerning him. Here is one instance.

Treating of the influence which Florence Radewyn exercised upon all with whom he came into contact, à Kempis gives the following illustration from his own personal experience: 'Master John Boehm, the Rector of the schools and a prebendary of the principal church, under whom for a long time I pursued my studies, was a great friend of Master Florence, and always willingly followed his advice; for he knew that he would be thereby doing what was pleasing to God. When the time for paying our fees came round, each in his turn used to give what he owed. Then I also placed my payment in his hand, requesting him to return me the book I had left with him as a pledge. But as he was acquainted with me, and knew that I was under the care of Master Florence, he said to me: "Who gave you this money?" I replied: "My master, Florence." "Go," said he, "take him back his money; for his sake I will take no fee from you." I carried back the money, therefore, to my Master Florence, and said: "For your sake the master has returned my fee." "I thank him," said he, "however, I will take care to repay him in another and a better way." '*

Like John Cele, John Boehm was choirmaster as well as Rector of the schools, and it appears that he ruled his scholars with as firm a hand in the church as in the class-room. Florence Radewyn, as one of the prebendaries, had his stall in the

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xxiv., n. 2.

sanctuary, and he would often unite his well-modulated voice with those of the scholars and clerics, many of whom were his own disciples. Of one such occasion Thomas gives us the following pleasing anecdote. Speaking of the recollection of his Superior in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, he says: 'I also at that time used to attend the choir with other students, as I had been bidden by Master Boehm, who vigorously presided over the school and the choir. Whenever, therefore, I saw my Master Florence in the sanctuary, although he did not notice what was going on around him, yet in awe of his presence, because of the reverence of his posture, I took care not to utter a word. And once it happened that I was standing near him in choir, and that he turned to our book to sing with us. And being behind me, he placed his hand upon my shoulder, and I remained still, scarcely daring to move, astounded at his gracious condescension.'*

From this little incident we can gauge the veneration which Thomas entertained towards his holy benefactor, and the impression which the saintly priest's life and conversation must have made upon his tender mind. Indeed, we have but to read his history as recorded by à Kempis to recognise at once how closely the pupil studied his spiritual master, how he appreciated many traits of virtue which would have escaped eyes less piously observant, and how he strove to model his own life upon the pattern which he daily saw before him. Then, also, we begin to realize that he who is praising these virtues in another is unconsciously giving us a glimpse of his

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xi., nn. 2, 3.

own interior ; we measure by the ideals which he cherishes in his own heart, and proposes for our imitation, the heights of sanctity which he himself had attained ; in a word, the conviction grows upon us that we are reading the life of a saint written by a saint.

In recording the history of a public man who has done great service for the Church or for his country, it is always deemed necessary to give some account of the times in which he lived, of the contemporaries with whom he laboured, of the friends who shared his toils, and of the adversaries who tried to thwart his plans. So also, in giving the life of one whose days were passed in less stirring scenes, it is always deemed equally necessary to depict the surroundings in which the subject of the story lived and moved, and to recount something of the acquaintances and friends whose dispositions and conversation helped to mould the character one is endeavouring to unfold. This also we purpose to do in the present work. But here we enjoy an advantage granted to very few who have set themselves the task of writing a biography. The history of the friends and associates of Thomas à Kempis we have from his own pen ; so that we see these holy men not merely as others saw them, not even solely as they were in themselves—a matter of lesser moment in the present connection—but we see them as Thomas himself saw them. What more sure means could we have of forming an estimate of his character and of the influences which helped to mould it ? A man writes himself, but perhaps never more so than when he is describing the good qualities and praising the virtues of his most intimate

friends. I will therefore often treat, and occasionally at some length, of the associates of à Kempis as portrayed by himself; but in this I will endeavour to preserve a due proportion, and ever to make the hero of our story the centre of the interest that attaches to his surroundings.

Moreover, it is my desire to give as much as possible of this little work in à Kempis' own words. I quite despair, however, of being able to transfer to the prosaic English of to-day the inexpressible charm that clings to the author's medieval Latin. Thoughts that in the original refresh and delight, when rendered in our vernacular, appear quite insipid, or are altogether lost. I will refrain, then, from giving any quotations which, though charming for their air of quaintness and piety, are not quite to the point, and will content myself with those that directly bear on the matter in hand.

We have just seen that after a time young Thomas was admitted into the house over which Florence Radewyn himself presided. We have also already remarked the impression made upon his youthful mind by his first acquaintance with the holy manner of life followed by the Devout Brethren. Let us now see what were his thoughts concerning them when time had ripened that acquaintance, when he had grown quite familiar with them, when he had, in fact, become one of them. 'The first director and spiritual guide of this exemplary confraternity,' he writes, 'was Master Florence, a man adorned with every virtue and filled with Divine wisdom in the knowledge of Christ, who humbly followed with his priests and clerics the rule of life instituted by the

holy Apostles. These, therefore, having one heart and one soul in God, placed all they possessed in the common purse, and, contenting themselves with simple food and vesture, gave not a thought to the morrow. For, willingly dedicating themselves to the service of God, all were eager to obey their Superior or his Vicar; for they regarded obedience as their fundamental rule, and strove with all their power to conquer themselves, to resist their passions, and to overcome the motions of their own will. Moreover, they were accustomed to ask with great earnestness to be severely reprehended for any fault or negligence. And so these men were rich in grace and true devotion; in word and example they gave great edification, and by patiently enduring the contempt of worldlings they drew many to despise the world. And those who had once despised them, esteeming their life foolish and contemptible, being afterwards converted to God and experiencing the grace of devotion, were compelled to confess before all that these men were truly the servants and friends of God.*

But, as we would naturally expect, the spirit of the Modern Devotion found its fullest expression and was brought to its highest perfection in the home of Florence Radewyn himself. Thomas is enraptured with the recollection of the virtues and holiness displayed by the members of that pious household. 'There,' he exclaims, 'humility, the first of all the virtues, was prized and practised equally by the greatest and the least, turning an earthly habitation into a paradise, and changing mortal men into heavenly pearls, to be glorified as living stones in

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Florentii,' c. 1., n. 3.

the temple of God. There obedience, the mother of virtues and the guiding star of discretion, flourished under so strict a discipline that it was deemed the height of wisdom to obey with promptitude, and it would be considered a terrible crime to be inattentive to the advice or the slightest word of a senior. There charity towards God and their neighbour so inflamed their hearts and words that hardened sinners, on hearing their holy discourse, were melted to tears, and tepid souls, enkindled by the fire of their eloquence, departed filled with spiritual joy and resolved to sin no more.

‘There the weapons of the spiritual warfare were bright with use against each vice, and old and young alike learned to combat stoutly against the devil, their own flesh, and the deceits of the world. There the memory of the ancient Fathers and the fervour of the monks of Egypt, which had lain, as it were, half-dead upon the earth, revived once more, and the clerical state was raised to a standard of the highest perfection, as in the days of the primitive Church. There were heard devout exhortations in the spiritual exercises, and in the daily meditations the most holy and dolorous Passion of our Saviour Jesus Christ was oft and lovingly recalled and dwelt upon, and thereby was gained strength of soul to remedy the deadly bite of the infernal serpent, to temper the passions of the mind, and to rouse the sluggish heart from things of earth by the imitation of the Crucified to things divine.’*

Such was the household of which the youthful à Kempis became a member, and we may be sure

* ‘*Vita Florentii*,’ c. xxi., nn. 1, 2.

that he was not the least fervent and devout of those whose virtues he thus highly extols. Indeed, Thomas must have been already conspicuous among the other scholars dependent on Florence Radewyn for his fervour and devotion before he would be admitted into that house. For this was a favour highly prized, and by no means granted indiscriminately to all, as we can deduce from what à Kempis tells us in the biography of his dearest friend at Deventer, Arnold Wyron of Schoonhaven. From this Life we also learn of the admission of Thomas himself into that holy house, though this information, as all else concerning himself, is given us only incidentally. For à Kempis in his numerous writings never speaks of himself except when it is absolutely necessary for his subject, and even then, as often as possible, he refers to himself only in the third person. Thus we are told many a pleasing incident of a 'certain Cleric' or a 'certain Brother,' whom we strongly suspect to be the author himself, but it is only occasionally, from the writings of others, that we can be sure that such is really the case.

In the biography just cited Thomas mentions himself more frequently than usual, because, as we have just said, the subject of the sketch was one of his most intimate friends and closest companions; in fact, he shared one bed and one room with him for nearly a whole year. I will give the substance of this Life, together with an account of some other companions of à Kempis at Deventer, in the next chapter. I will be as brief as possible; but the reader will forgive me if I appear at times somewhat

prolix; for I have already shown the necessity of dwelling on this point in order to be able to appreciate at their just value the influences that helped to form the mind and heart of the venerable author of the 'Imitation.'

CHAPTER III

Arnold Wyron and other associates and instructors of à Kempis
at Deventer

HE son of a wealthy citizen of Schoonhaven, Arnold Wyron, in his very childhood, showed signs of remarkable piety and devotion. He cared little for boyish games, and his chief pleasure was to visit the church, and there pour forth his soul in prayer before the various altars. Attracted by the fame of the Devout Brotherhood, he betook himself to Deventer about the same time as the younger à Kempis, and, as Thomas, so did he also immediately place himself under the spiritual guidance of Father Florence, while he continued to pursue his studies under the auspices of the reverend Rector, John Boehm.

On his way to and from the school he usually managed to slip into a church to pay a visit to his beloved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. In the class-rooms his conduct was most edifying. He paid the closest attention to the discourse of the professor, and in the interval between one lecture and another he occupied himself with taking notes on what he had just heard, reading some spiritual book, or communing with God in silent prayer.

When he had made sufficient progress in his studies, despising the comforts of his home and his prospects of success in the world, Arnold expressed an intense desire to spend his life in poverty and obedience with the Devout Clerics living under the rule of Florence Radewyn. ‘He did not labour much,’ says à Kempis, ‘to acquire great learning, but he strove his utmost to preserve a good conscience and a pure heart, knowing that the clean of heart are blessed and most pleasing to God. And he began to make earnest and constant petitions to be allowed to dwell in the house of Master Florence all the days of his life, desiring no other state in the whole world than to lead so devout a life with such devout brethren and worthy servants of God in obedience to the prudent direction of so venerable a Father.’*

‘He persisted, therefore, in his request; but Master Florence, that he might prove him, delayed the granting of his petition, and said to him: “You should learn to write well, and then there will be some hope for you.” On hearing this, he strove with all diligence to learn the art of caligraphy, and often went to a certain good writer to beg him to instruct him more fully. And he said to me: “Oh, if I knew how to write well, that I might the sooner dwell with Master Florence. I trust that, by the grace of God, I would be very willing to overcome my passions if only I could write well.” And when I heard this I was in wonder at his sincerity and fervour, which urged him to strive his utmost to do as Master Florence had said. And I in my turn thought within

* ‘*Vita Arnoldi Schoonhov*,’ n. 6.

myself, saying: "I also would be very desirous to write well if I knew that thereby I would become better." But he had a special gift of God, which aided him in the performance of every good work, so that nothing he did out of obedience seemed burthensome to him.*

The 'certain good writer' mentioned in this paragraph was most probably Thomas himself, who had already attained great proficiency in the work of transcribing books and manuscripts. This was a labour upon which, as we have already seen, the Devout Brotherhood chiefly depended for their support. It was a labour also which they highly prized, because it rendered them familiar with the sacred Scriptures and the Fathers, and likewise because it was the means in those days, when printing was not yet invented, of bringing within the reach of the people a more intimate knowledge of these holy works. It is thus that in after life à Kempis speaks of the merit of transcribing good books:

'It is a very good work to write books which Jesus loves, and in which He Himself is spoken of, taught, and known. Doubt not that you will be loved by Him and bountifully rewarded if you carefully transcribe the books of the Church unto His glory and the good of your neighbour. If he who offers a cup of cold water to the thirsty goes not without his reward, what will be the recompense of him who, by his writing, ministers the water of saving wisdom to the soul that will never die? Each letter duly formed is a victim of praise offered to God. Blessed, there-

* 'Vita Arnoldi Schoonhov,' nn. 6, 7.

fore, the hand of him who writes, and blessed the fingers which are employed in such a work.’*

But to return to Arnold Wyron. After Father Florence had tried his patience and perseverance for nearly a year, he at last acceded to his request. With him Thomas also had the happiness to be admitted: ‘At the same time, by the favour and advice of Master Florence, I began to dwell in that house, and for a year almost I remained with Arnold in that community, both being content with one bed and one little chamber. There I was greatly encouraged by the sweet discourse of the Brethren to despise the world, and there also Arnold daily assisted me with his pious admonitions and instructions. Whatever I could then gain by writing I contributed towards the common expenses, and whatever was wanting to me the generous regard of my beloved master Florence supplied, coming to my assistance in all my needs.

‘Many marks of devotion did I observe in Arnold,’ continues à Kempis, ‘for he was very exemplary and pious both at home and in the school, troublesome and morose towards no one, but gracious and kind to all. At four o’clock every morning he aroused himself immediately he heard the bell, and rising cheerfully, prayed awhile at his bedside, offering the firstfruits of his lips to the Lord. Then, dressing quickly, he proceeded in good time to the oratory to read the little office of the Blessed Virgin and of the Holy Cross, never delaying others, but always striving to be the earliest. To Mass also he hastened with the first, and humbly kneeling before the altar, he

* ‘Concio Vigesima,’ nn. 5, 6.

attended the Holy Sacrifice with suppliant reverence, desisting not from prayer and meditation until the sacred rites had been completed. He liked a quiet corner away from the crowd, that he might not be embarrassed in his prayer, and then the more concealed he was, the more fervently he prayed. He was careful also not to allow his voice to be heard; for in his secret devotion he wished to be known to God alone. Nevertheless, he could not always thus repress himself, but at times his burning light shone forth in spite of him.

‘ Thus it happened sometimes that I watched him secretly to see how he behaved in his prayer, and on such occasions I would be inflamed by his fervour to pray with the hope of tasting sometimes that grace of devotion which he seemed to enjoy every day. Nor will it appear strange that he should find devotion in his prayer, if we consider the strict guard he maintained over his heart and his mouth wherever he might be.

‘ On the approach of the festivals of Christ and the Saints, he endeavoured to prepare himself with special fervour for Holy Communion. And he would say: “A great feast is at hand; let us prepare ourselves devoutly to receive the Lord.” Or, “To-day is the feast-day of such and such a Saint; let us fervently implore his intercession.”

‘ Every word of the Superior or his Vicar he received as reverentially as if it had come from the mouth of God, or of some Saint. He never dreamt of discussing or passing judgment on their commands, or of interpreting them otherwise than in their literal sense. And so he possessed great internal peace, and was as

dear to God as he was to men, and as if always rejoicing in the Lord, he was ever ready to obey every order.

‘And thus not only in his youth, but even to the day of his death, he remained as obedient and as submissive as an innocent child. In his clothing, also, in his words, and in all his behaviour, he was a pattern of modesty and humility, always taking in good part whatever he perceived unruly or faulty in others. He was accustomed to seek the lowest place, not in mere pretence, but in all sincerity. As others are grieved by humiliations, so he was grieved by the withdrawal of humiliations. In his intercourse with the Brethren he was agreeable without levity ; yet he spoke not much, but guarded his lips, discoursed only of the things that edify, and was ever more willing to listen than to instruct.’

One mark of Arnold’s humility which à Kempis dwells upon was the fear he felt lest he should be a burden to the community of which he considered himself so unworthy to be a member. It was this fear that induced him to do his utmost in the way of transcribing and other manual labour in order to contribute his share towards the expenses of the house, and not content with even this, he annually obtained a sum of money from his father for the same purpose. And when his father died, his first and most natural impulse was to transfer the whole property thus left to him into the hands of Father Florence and his disciples. With this end in view he hastened to Holland to his native town ; but on the way he was overtaken by a severe illness which carried him off in a few days. He happened to be staying with a

community of the Devout Brethren at Zutphen when he was seized with the disease that proved so fatal, and feeling that his end was nigh, he resolved to remain there, that he might die assisted by the prayers and the presence of the Brothers he loved so well. Thomas describes his last moments in these words :

‘On the morrow of St. Wyron, on the feast, that is, of St. Gundulph, martyr, having settled his temporal affairs, he received Holy Viaticum about the hour of vespers and was also anointed. As night came on, he grew very weak. Having desired the Brethren to assemble round him, he commended himself to their prayers, and begged them to announce his death to a certain virgin named Lidwyne, of whose patience in suffering marvellous tales are told, and who had promised to pray for him once when he visited her in Holland. After that he lay back in full consciousness until about ten o’clock that night. As the end approached, he showed no sign of sorrow, but declared that he was ready. And then, at the hour above-mentioned, while the Brothers were praying round him, he gave up the ghost, seemingly without much pain. From his youth he had lived with the Devout Brethren, preserving his conscience undefiled, and as a true servant of God and a devoted lover of Christ he had persevered in the Brotherhood in the lowly state of a cleric for one and thirty years. This dear and amiable Brother died on May 9, A.D. 1430, in the city of Zutphen in Gelderland, and he was buried in the cemetery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, on the south side of the church.’*

* ‘*Vita Arnoldi Schoonhov*,’ n. 13.

Such was the beautiful life, such the beautiful death, of perhaps the most beloved and most familiar of à Kempis' early friends. His character, as sketched for us by Thomas, exactly tallies with what we know of Thomas himself from his biographers, and the virtues he praises in him are precisely those which we find most frequently and earnestly inculcated in his spiritual works, especially the 'Imitation.' Thus it becomes easy for us to gauge the importance of the share taken by this pious youth in forming the mind and heart of our Venerable Thomas.

From his own words it is clear that à Kempis considered himself far inferior to Arnold in sanctity and devotion. Doubtless this was in great measure due to his innate humility and modesty; but we may also well believe that his young friend possessed the gift of devotion, so prized among the Brethren, to a marked degree. For his was a soul that God designed to call speedily to Himself, and so an abundance of grace was poured out upon him, that he might accomplish by leaps and bounds, as it were, that to which others attain slowly and with great effort, whereas the fulness of the merits which Thomas was to gain would not be completed until after a length of days granted to very few. And so, perhaps, his piety was less exuberant than that of his holy friend, but it was none the less solid and true.

Arnold Schoonhaven, however, was not the only Brother to whom Thomas, in his youth, could look for example, encouragement and advice, and whose life, in later days, he could recall with fond reverence and regret. The great in holiness and the great in wickedness are equally rare, but we usually find that

when such individuals do appear, they attract around them a crowd of followers, who emulate their characteristics, and who spread their influence, whether for good or evil, far and wide, and who continue to extend it long after their ideals have passed to their account. To this rule Gerard Groot and Florence Radewyn were no exceptions. Not only did their confraternity at Deventer become a nursery of holy and learned men ; many also in the prime of life were drawn to them, men of hitherto widely divergent interests and pursuits, and now all endeavouring to attain, each with his peculiar talents and natural bent, to that high standard of perfection and to that spirit of devotion which were characteristic of the Brotherhood. Of these a few have been immortalized by the pen of à Kempis. According to my promise, I will proceed to give a brief epitome of each of these edifying little biographies ; though, indeed, it were a pleasant task to translate here in full the beautiful records he has left us of these models of his youth.

The subject of the first of these lives of the disciples of Master Florence is a priest, named John Gronde, a famous preacher in his day and a skilful and prudent director of souls. It was Groot himself that requested him to come from Amsterdam to Deventer to be the confessor of the Devout Brethren. Having obtained the permission of his ecclesiastical superiors, he came most willingly, was warmly received by Gerard and Florence, and at once adapted himself to their manner of life. When Groot died, Father John took his place as Rector of the Devout Sisters, and he continued to hold that office till his death. He frequently preached to crowded congregations at Deventer, and sometimes

he gave missions at Zwolle. Indeed, he seems to have been a truly Apostolic man. 'He was simple in his dress,' says our author, 'and moderate in his food. He flattered not worldlings for the sake of gain, but, as a true preacher of the Gospel, he sought the good of souls and the increase of spiritual perfection in the houses of the Devout.'

In his last illness he desired to be carried from the convent of the Sisters whom he had ruled to the house of Father Florence, that he might die in the midst of his Brethren. His wish was granted. Florence and the Brothers stood by his bedside as the last hour approached. 'Behold, the enemy is striving to disturb me, and he wishes to confound me at the last,' the dying man exclaimed. 'Fear not,' said Master Florence, 'but trust in the Lord, and answer not his suggestions.' To which, as one truly obedient, Master John replied: 'In the name of the Lord,' and this was the last word he uttered before his death. He passed away on the morning of May 7, 1392, in the fortieth year of his age. 'He was buried in the Church of the Blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, at Deventer, by the side of Master Gerard and in the same tomb. . . . As they loved each other in life, so in death their bodies were not divided.'*

Father John Brinkerink, of Zutphen, succeeded John Gronde as chaplain to the Sisters. In his younger days this priest had been a favourite disciple of Gerard the Great, and had accompanied him in many of his missionary journeys, being to him in all things, as à Kempis expresses it, another St. Luke to

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. ii.; 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 154.

another St. Paul. Like Gerard himself, he was most eloquent in his sermons, and most fearless in his denunciation of the vices of the times. Yet, with all his zeal, he was a most humble and modest man. On one occasion he declared he would willingly lose his head if only he were sure of going straight to purgatory; and, at another time, while preaching, he exclaimed: 'Oh, how great and sublime is the priestly state, the dignity of which no mortal can express! If I could put off this vestment as easily as I put it on, I would divest myself of it at once!' In his last illness his only anxiety was for the welfare of the Sisters who had been placed under his care. At the death of John Gronde these holy women numbered but sixteen; at the death of this second spiritual guide they numbered 115, many of whom were professed Canonesses Regular. Brinkerink, therefore, sent for the Prior of Windesheim—at that time the Superior-General of all the disciples of Gerard Groot—and expressed to him his earnest desire that the interests of the Sisters, both lay and religious, should be well cared for, and that they should not be permitted to fall away from their first fervour. Relieved of all anxiety on this point, he gave himself up to ardent longings for his heavenly home, whither he departed shortly after, on March 26, A.D. 1419. He was buried before the high altar of the Convent Chapel of the Canonesses at Diepenvene, who owed their establishment to his unwearied energy and zeal.*

Thomas commences the memoir of the Devout Brother whose life he gives us next in these words:

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. iv.

‘Resplendent among the early luminaries of the Devout Brethren at Deventer was a certain priest named Lubert, the son of John Berner, a native of Zwolle, and a man of great humility and exemplary obedience. Many Brethren besides myself, at Windesheim, at Mount St. Agnes, and at Arnheim, of whom several still survive, and some have fallen asleep in the Lord, were well acquainted with his holy life in Christ. But what can I, a poor sinner, say of such a saintly man, to whose holiness so great a multitude of religious bear witness? Yea, even men of the world, councillors and magistrates, the canons also, and the prebendaries of Deventer in his day knew that Master Lubert was a man of many virtues.’

After such a prologue as this, we naturally expect to find that Lubert Berner was a man of exceptional sanctity even in that association of exceptionally holy men. And, indeed, he appears to have been possessed of singular virtue. Having taken his degree at Prague, Lubert returned home, and remained for a while in the bosom of his family. Charmed, however, by the holiness of the Devout Brethren at Zwolle, he resolved to join the Confraternity, but, fearing the opposition of his father, secretly left his home and made his way to Deventer. The elder Berner was exceedingly angry at this step, but on his deathbed he was reconciled with his beloved child, and left to him all his property. This inheritance was immediately handed over to Father Florence, and with the proceeds a new house was built for the Brotherhood, A.D. 1391.

‘In the same year,’ writes our author, ‘Lubert, with his colleague, Henry Brune, a devout man, was

ordained priest. These two, who had been nourished in that house as twin-brothers with the milk of devotion, and who were now adorned with eminent virtues, were considered worthy of the honour of the priesthood, for they were men of noble family according to the world, and according to God, the foremost in piety, humble also, sober, chaste, kind, joyous, fervent, lovable, docile, simple, and obedient. But now I will strive to narrate a few instances of the conduct of Master Lubert after he was ordained—instances which I have witnessed or have often heard related by the Brethren.

‘Once,’ he continues, ‘while he was writing in his chamber, Master Florence sent requesting him to come to him. As soon as he heard this, he put down his pen, and rose from his seat. Now, he happened to be at the last line of the page, and perhaps three or four words remained unwritten. Seeing this, the Brother who had been sent for him said: “Finish writing that line, and then the page will be complete. You will still be in good time.” To which, as a truly obedient man, he made reply: “No more. I must obey.” . . . Master Florence, being informed of this ready obedience of Lubert, thus addressed him: “Lubert, Lubert, thou knowest well how to consider thy own gain and the profit of thy soul!”’*

This holy priest, it appears, was skilled in calligraphy, and Thomas relates how once a young man asked him to write out a sentence which he might take as a copy. He complied, and at the same time he remarked: ‘You will learn to write well, for you have long and flexible fingers.’ ‘And, by the grace of

* ‘*Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.*,’ c. v., 5, 6.

God,' adds à Kempis, 'his prophecy has proved true. And these are the words which he wrote out in a large, round hand as an exemplar and also as a good motto: "Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart." These words were deeply engraven on his mind, and so, leaving aside the axioms of philosophers, he exhorted to the humility of Christ, which leads to true wisdom and to the reward of eternal life.'*

In all probability the young man to whom this prediction was made, and of whom it was afterwards fulfilled, was Thomas himself; for, as we have already remarked, he always carefully disguises anything that might redound to his own honour. The preference here given, it may be noted, to spiritual wisdom as compared with the wisdom of philosophers is also characteristic of the author of the 'Imitation.'

Thomas narrates in another place how humbly Lubert would receive a rebuke. Indeed, Father Florence seems to have made a point of frequently and sharply reprehending this lowly-minded priest for the slightest fault, and even when he was not at fault at all. He acted in the same manner with another of the Brethren, John Ketel, the cook of the establishment. And this he did not only for their own spiritual profit, for he saw with what avidity they received these humiliations, but also for the sake of edifying the community. 'And though the beloved Father,' adds Thomas, 'often reproached them before the Brethren in order to give an example to the rest, yet he tenderly loved them, as he showed especially

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. v., 21.

by the copious floods of tears which he shed at their death.*

For these two holy men died about the same time, victims of the plague that devastated Deventer in the year 1394. The death of Lubert was most beautiful and edifying. He experienced no fear of that dark passage to eternity. His one desire was to be dissolved and to be with Christ. 'He often inquired how near he was to death, and whether he exhibited all the signs of approaching death, and whether difficulty of breathing were a sure sign of death, and so on. And in nowise could we console him better than by assuring him that death was nigh.†

We would willingly linger round the bed of this departing saint, and relate with à Kempis and with Æmilius Buren, who attended him in his last moments, what humility he displayed, what compunction, what devotion, what ardent longings for his Father's home. We would also like to narrate the singular, but instructive, temptation which assailed him towards the end, and the wondrous vision which was vouchsafed to him after he had conquered. We must, however, pass on, and add here only the concluding words of à Kempis: 'And when the Brethren had been called, he shortly expired after a brief agony, and happily fell asleep in the Lord, full of virtues and good works, for which may God be blessed for ever. Amen.†

We will now say a few words concerning Berner's friend and colleague, Henry Brune. This devout priest was born at Leyden, in Holland. Among the

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. v., 14.

† *Ibid.*, 32.

‡ *Ibid.*, 34.

Brethren he was noted for his piety, simplicity, and angelic purity. 'Sometimes in the winter,' writes à Kempis, 'he would sit near the fire warming his hands; but his face he would turn to the wall, secretly praying the while and religiously observing silence. And when I observed this I was much edified thereby, and I loved him all the more on that account. I never heard an unbecoming word from his mouth,' he adds, 'nor did I ever hear anyone complain of him, except that he was too slow in saying Mass.' But this fault, if such it was, they easily condoned, because of the evident delight he experienced in the holy Sacrifice. Father Brune survived the longest of all who were ordained in the early days of the Brotherhood at Deventer. He did not depart to his reward until after a laborious and fruitful ministry of forty-four years. He was then struck down, a victim of the plague that was raging at Zutphen, where he was dwelling with others of the Devout Brethren. His remains were laid in the cemetery of St. Walburga, Virgin, attached to the Collegiate Church of the Canons Regular in Zutphen.*

The Brother whose memoir comes seventh in the list of these lives is a priest named Gerard, of Zutphen, a man remarkable for his zeal and his love of sacred learning. In his very childhood, à Kempis tells us, he loved books more than play, and in his youth holidays were to him days of grief. On account of his well-known love of books, he was placed in charge of the library of the Brotherhood, an important office in those days, when manuscripts were so precious

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. vi., n. 9.

and rare. Such was his abstraction when engaged in his studies, that even in spring or summer he never dreamt of opening his window to breathe a little fresh air. The same abstraction and the same neglect of self he displayed in all his conduct, in his every action, and it required much watchfulness on the part of Father Florence to see that he took proper nourishment and received medical attendance when needed. Yet, withal, Gerard was no mere book-worm. He wrote several works. His opinion on difficult cases of conscience and on obscure points of Canon Law was eagerly sought, and Father Florence frequently asked and followed his advice in matters connected with the government of the Congregation. Indeed, Thomas calls him 'a pillar of the house and the Superior's right hand in the transaction of business.' He died among the Canons at Windesheim, while returning from a visit to the Abbot of Dicken- inghe. 'I think you are going to die,' was the simple warning of his companion, Æmilius, when he was taken ill. 'I think so, too,' was the equally simple reply. 'And so, the malady gaining on him, as if falling into a gentle slumber, he breathed forth the spirit of life on the night of St. Barbara, Virgin (December 4), A.D. 1394, in the thirty-first year of his age. His body was honourably interred by the Prior and the Canons in the passage before the door of the church.'*

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. vii. The Library of St. Monica's is possessed of an exceedingly ancient copy of a spiritual treatise by this devout Brother, entitled, 'De Spiritualibus Ascensionibus.' It bears all the marks of one of the earliest printed editions: no name of author, printer, or publisher is given, the initial letter

Thomas then proceeds to give a short memoir of Æmilius of Buren, whom we have already mentioned as assisting at the deathbed of Lubert Berner and of Gerard of Zutphen. Of all the holy Brethren at Deventer, not one seemed more fervent, not one more devout. He joyfully undertook and executed manual labours but ill suited to one of his gentle nurture and delicate frame. He faithfully assisted to the last many of the Brothers who died of the plague, and the one great sorrow of his life was the request, or rather command, of Father Florence to succeed him in the government of the Congregation. His term of office, however, was of short duration. After an exemplary rule of four years and three months 'he fell asleep in the Lord, on the day before the Feast of St. Barnabas, Apostle (June 11), A.D. 1404,' at the early age of thirty-two.*

The subject of the following biographical sketch is one James of Viana, a Devout Brother, whom Thomas commends especially for humility and the spirit of compunction. He bewailed bitterly his slightest faults, and often blamed in himself that for which he was praised. It was with great reluctance, and only after a hard struggle, that he consented to receive ordination. 'For at that time,' says à Kempis, 'the priesthood was a thing very rare and precious among the Devout Brethren. No one dreamt of accepting

of each paragraph has been added by hand, the pages are not numbered, but a peculiar system of lettering is used to distinguish the leaves, etc. Bound in the same codex is a work of à Kempis, 'De Vita et Beneficiis Salvatoris J. C. devotissimæ Meditationes cum Gratiarum actione.'

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. viii.

this dignity unless, being very holy, he was compelled to do so for the common good; for all shunned a high position, and sought rather to remain in a lowly state and office.' And thus we find James answering a man who questioned him concerning their manner of life in these words: 'If anyone wish to dwell with us, he must humble himself and make himself the least of all. Such a one will enjoy a paradise here, and will be very well contented.' These requisites seem to be precisely those which James himself fulfilled. His only fault appears to have been excessive mortification. And when corrected by Father Florence in this matter, he would humble himself the more, because he had not acted with sufficient discretion. He died, after a lingering illness, on the day following the Feast of St. Gregory the Great (March 12), for whom he entertained a special devotion, and he was buried in the cemetery where lay so many of his brethren outside the Church of St. Lebuin, in Deventer, A.D. 1400.*

We have now come to the last of those disciples of Florence Radewyn with whom the young à Kempis was intimately acquainted, from whose holy example he profited so much, and the edifying story of whose virtues he has transmitted to us. Of all these saintly men Thomas's special friends seem to have been the youthful Arnold Schoonhaven, whose beautiful life has been already given at some length, and John Ketel, the cook, whose memoir we are now commencing.

John was by birth a citizen of Duseborch, near Wessel, on the Rhine, but for many years he dwelt,

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. ix.

a prosperous merchant, at Dordrecht. Even in the midst of the turmoil of business he often felt an inspiration to dedicate himself to the service of God, yet he knew not how to follow the call. At last he determined to become a priest. As a first step in this direction, he provided himself with gorgeous vestments 'worthy of a cathedral Bishop or a royal Abbot,' and then he proceeded to Deventer to perfect himself in the branches of knowledge necessary for him in the state he purposed to embrace. But at Deventer he beheld the edifying lives of the Brothers of the Common Life, and the example of these holy men wrought quite a revolution in his soul. He bought and clothed himself in the habiliments of a cook, and then knocked at the door of Radewyn's house and earnestly entreated to be allowed to serve the Brethren by working in the kitchen. Father Florence so far acceded to his request as to admit him on trial.

'And he became,' says à Kempis, 'an example of humility and submission to all who dwelt in the house, giving himself up to perfect mortification for the love of the Crucified. And the fame of his holy life reached even the ears of men in the world, and many magnates were astonished that he, who was once a rich merchant, had now become a poor cook and a humble Brother. For he who once purposed to ascend by learning to the dignity of orders, afterwards, leaving aside every aspiration to rank and honour, sought the lowest place, in imitation of Christ, Who humbled Himself, taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and ministering to His disciples. . . . And he used to give heartfelt thanks to God that He had called him

to this service, and had not permitted him to perish with so many in the world. And sometimes he remarked with great joy of heart to the Brethren: "Am I not become a great priest and prelate, seeing that I communicate the community twice a day?" meaning by this simile that morning and evening he prepared their food for them, and thus refreshed Christ in each of the Brothers.

'He was often found on his knees praying near the fire,' continues Thomas, 'and while with his hand he stirred the pot, with his mouth he was devoutly singing psalms. Of his kitchen he made his oratory, for he knew that God is everywhere, and he made use of the material fire to enkindle his spiritual fervour. Whatever he heard sung in church, he afterwards ruminated upon in the midst of his labours. Thus, ever bearing God in mind, outwardly he was occupied with the duties of a cook, but inwardly he was free to meditate on heavenly things, passing no time unprofitably, yet neglecting not his devotional exercises. . . . Three saints he loved with a special love, namely, St. Alexius, who lived for a long time in his own home disguised in the habit of a pilgrim, and enduring much contempt from his own household; St. Francis, the lover of poverty, who desired to possess nothing earthly here below; and St. Elizabeth, the widow, who, abounding in mercy, distributed all her goods to the poor, and despised the wealth and glory of the world as so much dung.'

These saints he honoured because they had, in a more striking manner than others, contemned this world for the sake of the next. Indeed, his love of

poverty and his love of the poor seem to have been the distinguishing characteristics of this holy Brother, who, for Christ's sake, had renounced all that he possessed; and this twofold love he strove to instil into all with whom he came into contact. '“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” says the Gospel,’ he remarked one day to some young clerics who had come to visit him; ‘but nowhere do we read, Blessed are the Masters of Arts.’ But with this spirit of holy poverty John united its sister virtues, humility and patience. We have already remarked, when treating of Lubert Berner, how frequently Father Florence used to rebuke these two lowly-minded men, with a view to their own spiritual profit and the edification of their brethren. Thomas records several instances in illustration of this point, which, however, we reluctantly omit.

When the plague broke out at Deventer, A.D. 1398, it was the good cook's earnest desire to go and assist the poor, who, as usual, were the first to suffer. But he himself was stricken with the fell disease before he had time to execute his charitable intentions. Some of his poor clerics then came to visit him, as he lay dying, and looking on them compassionately, he exclaimed: ‘Alas! my beloved poor, henceforth I shall not be able to aid you. I commend you to God, that He may provide for you in all good.’

‘A few days before his death, he was requested to say whether he knew of anything that might be corrected in the house, because the Brethren were very willing to amend. Then the faithful lover of the poor replied: “In three things I would desire improvement. First, that we should eat more sparingly,

in order to give more freely to the poor ; secondly, that our more costly ornaments should be sold, and their price distributed among the poor ; thirdly, since we have many books, that some should be sold, only such as are necessary being retained, and thus the poor more generously assisted." And when he had said this, Master Florence, rejoicing in his compassion and devotedness, exclaimed : " Brother John, your words are exceedingly good." "

A Kempis then relates in his own simple style, without note or comment, a visit which our Divine Saviour deigned to pay this holy man upon his death-bed, and also a temptation of Satan, who appeared to him in visible form, and strove to terrify him with the remembrance of his former life. These supernatural visitations were of frequent occurrence among these holy men ; we shall have occasion to speak of many such in the course of this narrative, of some of which Thomas himself was the recipient. In the present instance, after John, comforted by the loving condescension of his Lord, had successfully put the evil one to flight, he gave himself up to pious ejaculations and earnest prayers. His attendant, Æmilius, with the eagerness of the Devout Brethren not to lose anything that might serve for edification, put his ear to the lips of the dying Saint to catch what he was saying, but his voice was so weak, he heard very little.

' At length, after a long agony and a hard struggle with the powers of death, amidst the devout prayers of the Brothers who had gathered round, he breathed forth the spirit of life, meeting a blessed end in the service of Christ, on the Ember Saturday after

Pentecost, the Feast of St. Petronilla, Virgin (May 31), A.D. 1398. His body was laid in the cemetery of St. Lebuin, where also many other Brethren, who died after him, rest in Christ, by Christ to be raised, with all the faithful, on the last day. May Christ be praised and exalted for so devout a man and so humble a cook, who in a brief span of years and with but little labour acquired (as we piously believe) Heaven's highest rewards.*

At the conclusion of some of these *Lives à Kempis* records certain devout sayings, favourite devotions, or spiritual letters of the Brother of whom he has been treating. All these are remarkably alike in sentiment and expression; there is a family likeness, as it were, in them all, and they all strike one as being very similar to much that is found in the 'Imitation.'

Thus, for instance, to the biography of John Ketel Thomas subjoins a 'Devout exercise of the same Brother John.' It begins with an exhortation addressed by the good cook to himself to be mindful of the goodness of God towards him, of the sins of his past life, of the nearness of approaching death, and of various other motives that should urge him to be ever most humble and submissive. In it he then proceeds to lay down the rule of his daily life, minutely describing every action and occupation of each successive hour, from the time he arose, 3 a.m., till he retired to rest, about 9 p.m., and giving full directions for every contingency that would be likely to occur. This fragment is exceedingly edifying, and reminds one very much in parts of Chapter XIX. of Book I. of the

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Flor.,' c. x.

'Imitation.' Indeed, a person unacquainted with the history of the works of à Kempis would be tempted to say that either Thomas had taken extracts from the cook's soliloquy, or Brother John had read and re-read the 'Imitation' until he had thoroughly conformed his daily life to its golden maxims. The truth lies somewhere between these two suppositions. Apart from its quotations from the Scriptures, the Fathers and other works sacred and profane, the 'Imitation' can hardly claim to be original in the sense that it is the emanation of one man's heart and intellect. It is rather the condensation of the spiritual wisdom of a school by one who was perhaps more acquainted than any other living man with its theory and practice.

When Thomas wrote his devout treatises, almost all the early shining lights of the Modern Devotion had set on this world to rise again with glorified brilliancy on the eternal horizon, and it became the endeavour of the Venerable Canon to preserve for his successors the spirit which had animated the founders and first disciples of that great and holy movement. Indeed, it does not seem too much to say that Divine Providence granted to him a wonderfully vigorous and green old age chiefly for this purpose, that he might transmit to his younger Brethren, both religious and secular, in all their purity the traditions of the Institute. How well Thomas acquitted himself of this task is known to all. The little works he composed, especially his masterpiece, the 'Imitation,' were but the reflex of the holy lives and practices of himself and his associates, both at Deventer and at Mount St. Agnes, and they became the spiritual guide-books and

manuals of the thousands of earnest men and women who in his own days and for many succeeding years came under the influence and, in various religious orders or in the world, practised the maxims of the Modern Devotion.

CHAPTER IV

Short biography of Florence Radewyn—Some visions vouchsafed to à Kempis at this time—His departure from Deventer

FROM the preceding pages may be gathered a good idea of the training which the youthful à Kempis received during the seven years or more that he dwelt at Deventer. Yet, after all, those whose lives we have hitherto portrayed were but disciples, even as Thomas himself. What of the Master of this school of Christian and religious perfection, in which the scholars attained such heights of holiness? The name of Florence Radewyn has already several times appeared in these pages. I have also given a brief description of his early life and of his first meeting with Gerard the Great. Various traits of his beautiful character have likewise been mentioned incidentally while treating of his followers. It only remains, then, to fill in the outline that has been drawn in order to make the picture complete. Without this our data in estimating the influences that helped to form the mind and heart of the Venerable à Kempis would be altogether incomplete.

After his own conversion Florence Radewyn strove with all the new-born zeal of his loving soul to induce

those young companions with whom he had been familiar during his college career to lay aside the vanities of the world and to aspire to a higher, nobler life. 'For with the fire with which he burned he wished to enkindle others; and the light with which he had been illumined by God he was not slow to communicate by word and example to those that came to see him.'* Nor were his efforts fruitless. Numbers, following his advice, left home and friends and embraced the Apostolic life that was led by the disciples of Gerard Groot.

It was not, however, to be expected that Satan would stand quietly by and see himself robbed of so many souls, upon which he had already begun to look as his just spoils. Accordingly, he made use of the weapons of ridicule, detraction and calumny in order to divert Florence from his good purpose, or to prevent others from having recourse to him and imitating his example. But the young cleric, as Thomas informs us 'went on his way, meek in the midst of the perverse, patient amidst detractors, rendering to no man evil for evil, but with a tranquil heart praying and holding his peace, or with a few reasonable words curbing the tongue of the foolish.'†

The result of such conduct was that Florence soon won that regard which is the usual reward of those who despise human respect. Greater numbers than ever flocked to hear his words. Even the magistrates of the city came to him for advice, while Gerard Groot and his associates, as we have already seen, deemed him worthy of the dignity of the priesthood, and

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. viii.

† *Ibid.*, c. ix.

afterwards of the government of the Congregation. Yet he was as little affected by all this honour as he had been moved by his recent adversities, but, 'as one truly poor and despicable in his own eyes, he thought not anything great of himself because of his ordination; but in his heart he placed his younger Brethren before himself, and once he spoke thus of a cleric not yet in sacred orders: 'Oh, if on the Day of Judgment I could offer my chalice for the pen of that cleric!''*

This humility Father Florence displayed also in the simplicity and poverty of his attire, which is thus described by à Kempis: 'The amess (a hooded cape) which he wore was very old and faded, and in many places bare of fur and as if eaten by moths. And when I saw him proceed to choir with such an amess, I grieved that so good and honourable a priest should go thus simply and humbly clad. On his feet he had not shapely sandals, as had the other prebendaries of the Church, but he had made himself instead a pair of poor clogs, which he had underlined with old leather, that he might enter choir without making a noise. His tunic and toga were of gray cloth. Once his uncle, out of kindness, had given him a new cloak, but he was unwilling to wear it, for it appeared to him too good, and he always preferred plain things to costly. His headgear was of a black, or gray, colour, and he always wore it, as it had been made for him in such a way as to protect his shoulders and his otherwise uncovered neck. His sleeves were short and closely fitting, and adorned with very few bows; moreover, from time to time, on account of wear and

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. x.

tear, they had been repaired with new pieces in front, for the holy priest of God was not ashamed to wear a tunic old and patched; yea, rather he and all his brethren strove with holy emulation to be clad in the poorer garments, and in this to excel one another.*

This same humility was manifested by the saintly Superior in his willingness to undertake the most lowly occupations. Gerard the Great had established the rule that no one should be admitted into the Congregation unless he were ready to work with his own hands, after the example of St. Paul. In the same spirit Father Florence introduced a custom that each member of the community should take his turn, week by week, to assist the Brother in the kitchen. From this practice he did not exempt even himself, and when a friend once expressed surprise to find him thus humbly employed, the holy man answered: 'While I am engaged in the kitchen, all are obliged to pray for me. I trust, therefore, to gain greater fruit from the prayers of others than if I were to pray alone.†

Still, this manual labour in the kitchen and elsewhere was considered rather an exercise of humility than as work suitable to the clerics, who formed the great majority of the Devout Brethren. Their principal task, as we have already remarked more than once, was that of composing and transcribing books. In this also the venerable Superior showed a bright example to his disciples. He was not skilled in caligraphy himself, and so did little in the work of transcription; but he joyfully prepared the parchment

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xii.

† *Ibid.*, c. xiii.

and other materials necessary for those who were to write. Or at other times he and a companion would go through together and correct the works which had been completed ; or he would take the Holy Scriptures and copy out certain passages that might serve for the edification of the Brethren. ' For he was always pleased and contented,' writes our author, ' when during the day he had done anything useful for the community, knowing that this would be most acceptable to God.'*

But as the fame of his holiness was noised abroad, such a multitude of strangers flocked to him for consolation and advice, that little leisure was left him for these pursuits. Nay, at times so great was the press of people around his door, that he had not time to take his necessary refreshment, or even to say the Divine Office. Thomas tells us that sometimes he would begin to recite the ' Hours,' and would be obliged to begin the same psalm over and over again on account of the frequent interruptions to which he was subjected. And lest he should cease to open the door to the one that was knocking, he would say to himself: ' Yet once more for the love of God.'†

This compassion towards the needy ' for the love of God ' was a distinguishing characteristic of Gerard, Florence, and of all their disciples, both amongst the Devout Brethren and among the Canons Regular of Windesheim, as, indeed, it was of the Canons Regular Hospitallers in England and elsewhere, and is to-day of the Canons, commonly known as the Monks, of St. Bernard. À Kempis tells us how many charitable

* ' Vita Florentii,' c. xiv.

† *Ibid.*

persons, knowing the delicate state of health to which the austerities of Father Florence had reduced him, would send him little delicacies to tempt his appetite, and these he with still greater charity would send on to others whom he knew to be ill or in need. He always had a list by him of the deserving poor, and some of these he would commend to the care of one or other of the Brethren. He also had a pious custom of inviting twelve poor students to his table every year on the feast of St. Gregory, in honour and in imitation of that holy Pontiff. 'And I,' says à Kempis, 'at his bidding have brought to his house at the dinner-hour some of these poor people whom he had designated to me by name. And when they had been refreshed with food and drink, they returned with joyful hearts to the schools, praising God for His benefits, and expressing heartfelt thanks to their generous host and his Brethren.'*

In his works of mercy to the poor the holy priest was ably seconded by several pious gentlemen and devout matrons of Deventer, who, out of reverence and love for him, willingly bestowed their alms on any deserving cases he might mention. It was to the charity of one of these good ladies, as we have seen, that Thomas was indebted for a comfortable home when first he came to Deventer. The large-hearted compassion of the Superior was thoroughly appreciated by his subjects. Thomas gives us an instance that shows how completely all the Devout Brethren were of accord in this matter :

'Once in Lent, when the times were somewhat dear (*cum tempora essent aliquatenus cara*), and the

* '*Vita Florentii*,' cc. xv., xvi.

poor mendicants were oppressed with want, many had recourse to their compassionate Father Florence, hoping to receive some little help, for it was not usual that anyone should depart from him empty or disconsolate. In these straits, therefore, the merciful Father, grieved and afflicted by the hunger of his devout poor, took counsel with his Brethren, and inquired what would be the best method of succouring these distressed persons, who were so reduced that they had neither money in their girdles nor bread in their scrips. Then all the Brothers unanimously expressed their eagerness to relieve these multitudes of poor people, especially as it was the holy season of Lent, when days of penance are observed, and when more bounteous pity should be exercised towards the needy. They, therefore, formed a strong resolution to deprive themselves of something, and to give more freely to the poor, and also beyond the ordinary time of labour to add one hour to their daily toil throughout Lent for the sake of the poor, and to collect together whatever they might gain by writing in that hour and to hand it to the steward of the poor, that he might buy the necessary food and distribute it to those in want. This was also done in other houses by some of the Brothers, transcribers and artificers, who offered to God an alms from their own toil, willingly denying themselves and most happily succouring the poor.*

And here it should be remembered that Thomas himself was one of these Brethren who came thus generously to the aid of the distressed, and that his share of the alms provided by this extra hour of

* '*Vita Florentii*,' c. xvi.

charitable labour would, thanks to his skill in the art of caligraphy, be no small item in the sum total. But, as usual, he thinks not of himself, or of his part in the good works he records. In this particular instance his thoughts revert to the kindness he personally experienced at the hands of Florence Radewyn and his associates, when first he came, a friendless child, to Deventer. Under the influence of these loving memories he gratefully exclaims :

‘ And who will worthily unfold all the works of mercy of this most affable Father towards the poor and towards strangers, and especially towards simple and devout servants of Christ? Though all should hold their peace, I will not be silent, but I shall sing for ever the compassion of Master Florence ; because for seven years, while he was still alive, I proved by an experience that admits of no doubt the multitude of his tender mercies. . . . To unfold to the full his virtues and works of charity my feeble tongue suffices not, for the life led by him and his Brethren exceeds human belief. Justly, then, may I say of them that which is written of Apostolic men : These were men of mercy, whose goodly deeds have not failed ; good things continue with their seed, and all the Church of the Saints shall declare their praise.’*

But to all a Saint’s indulgent compassion towards others Father Florence united all a Saint’s austere severity towards himself. Thomas speaks of his self-denial in tones of half admiration, half regret, for his abstinence was such that it ruined his constitution, reduced him to a state of constant debility, and often brought him to the point of death, from which he was

* ‘Vita Florentii,’ c. xvi.

again and again withdrawn by the fervid and sorrowful pleadings of his loving disciples to their heavenly Father.

‘The fervent and devout servant of God, Florence,’ writes à Kempis, ‘in the beginning of his conversion, with a view to subdue the concupiscence of the flesh, chastised his body by watchings and fastings with excessive rigour; for he considered not the weakness of nature, but in the fervour of his spirit he persecuted his domestic enemy to such a degree that with the weight of his severity he destroyed a citizen still necessary and faithful to him. He not only abstained from that which was unlawful and superfluous, but also denied himself much that was necessary, so that usually he possessed no appetite, and soon lost all taste for discerning food.’*

An instance of this loss of all relish for food is thus lovingly recorded by à Kempis: ‘I went to visit him one day in his cell, where he was reclining exhausted upon his bed, and I greeted him tenderly, grieving much at his weakness. Then Brother James of Viana, who was attending on him, offered him some little delicacy, saying: “This is very good, take a little of it. Does not it taste well?” Then he, in my hearing, replied: “A crust of bread would be more palatable to you than this to me.”’†

On account of this continual debility it was but seldom that the holy priest could take his meals with the community in the refectory. A little table would be prepared for him in the kitchen, and there he would take a slight refreshment, for his enfeebled stomach could not retain any solid food. ‘I, though

* ‘*Vita Florentii*,’ c. xvii.

† *Ibid.*

unworthy,' writes Thomas, 'being requested by him, often prepared his table and brought the little he required from the cellar; and with much joy I cheerfully waited upon him.'*

Yet, despite his constant infirmity, the holy servant of God was continually engaged in working for souls, consoling, advising, exhorting all who came to him with their spiritual and temporal difficulties and trials; but especially did he devote his energies to the well-being and progress of that great movement of the Modern Devotion at the head of which he had been placed, sending forth from the mother-house at Deventer numerous colonies of Devout Brothers and Sisters, and of Canons and Canonesses Regular throughout Holland and the adjacent provinces. Then, as from time to time, worn out by his labours and austerities, he lay down on his poor couch sick unto death, 'a message was sent to the neighbouring communities of Brothers and Clerics and Sisters that they should pray for him daily, that God might spare him still and lengthen his days for the salvation of many, lest the Devout should have sorrow upon sorrow, if they were deprived of so beloved a Father and so necessary a guide. And I was sometimes the bearer of this message, saying to the Sisters: "Pray for Master Florence, for he is seriously ill." And, lo! the merciful Lord, Who despises not the prayers of the poor, but willingly hears the sighs of the humble, restored health to His dear and faithful servant, *to make His might known to the sons of men.*'†

In these illnesses Father Florence was frequently

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xiii.

† *Ibid.*, c. xviii.

visited and assisted by a devout priest who had once been a famous physician, Everard Eza, a curate of Almelo. This doctor-priest freely confessed that all human remedies were useless in such a case and that the prayers of the Devout and the special favour of God alone could retain the soul in so enfeebled a body.

This Everard was one of the most remarkable of the many notable converts of Gerard the Great. He had heard of the preaching of the zealous deacon and of the wonders wrought by his burning words, and had determined to prove for himself whether Groot deserved his reputation. Accordingly he placed himself one day among Gerard's crowded audience, yet, ashamed to appear among the simple folk, who were then, as in the days of our Divine Lord, the foremost to listen to the Word of God, the sceptic physician concealed himself behind a pillar, and there waited, ready to criticise every word of the preacher. But once more God showed that He spoke by the mouth of His minister. The words that Gerard uttered that day were as so many sharp arrows piercing the very heart of his unseen listener. Eza went forth a changed man. He addressed himself to the holy deacon and revealed to him the wounds of his soul. The two became most intimate friends. But Gerard's untimely death deprived the doctor of his spiritual guide almost before he had entered upon the path of salvation.

In his distress he begged to be admitted among the disciples of Father Florence. At first he was received with fear and distrust, for once he had been a bitter enemy to the Institute. But he soon proved his

sincerity, and by his humility, devotion, and zeal for sacred learning won the hearts of all the Brethren. After he had become sufficiently imbued with the spirit of the Brotherhood, he took an affectionate leave of Father Florence and his associates, and returned to his home in Almelo, where he founded a colony of the Congregation according to the model of the mother-house at Deventer. Later on, A.D. 1394, he built a monastery near Northorn, under the invocation of Our Lady of the Wood, enriched it with gold and silver ornaments, books, and other necessities, and placed therein some of his own disciples, who received the habit of the Canons Regular, and afterwards incorporated themselves with the Congregation of Windesheim.

This account is taken from a memoir written by Thomas on the occasion of Everard's death, which took place in the year 1404. À Kempis concludes the little biography with these grateful words: 'Once, while I was at Deventer, I was ill, and he cured me so well that, by the favour of God, for a long time afterwards I was not troubled with the like malady.'*

It is rather tantalizing, by the way, that we cannot find any further particulars of this illness of our Venerable Thomas in his youth to which the above casual reference is made. On the one hand, it does not appear to have been very serious, otherwise his biographers would have made some mention of the fact; and, on the other, it was sufficiently grave to cause him to remember with gratitude the good physician who cured him. But, then, Thomas was of a loving disposition, and did not easily forget a

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 163.

benefit once conferred. On the whole, thanks to his sturdy constitution, regular habits, and constant moderation, he appears to have been troubled but little with bodily ailments. The name of Everard Eza will occur again in these pages.

But to return to Father Florence, of whose constant sufferings we were treating. These afflictions he bore with wondrous patience and even with joy, counting it a gain to suffer for Christ. Nor did our Lord permit his generosity to go without its reward. Besides those spiritual consolations that are ever the lot of those who lovingly carry their cross, at least one favour of a supernatural order was granted to the saintly priest in the midst of his physical pains. It was early on Easter Sunday morn. Lent was always a trying time for one already weakened by excessive fasts; yet Florence Radewyn never dreamt of then relaxing his austerities. On this occasion he was reduced to the very last extremity, and the Brethren scarcely dared hope that he would recover. But as the beautiful Easter dawn was breaking over the world, two angels appeared to the dying man; one brandished a sword, and threatened to strike, but the other stayed his hand, and cried: 'Strike not, for living he shall live, and shall not die!' And Florence awoke, wonderfully refreshed, and, to the great surprise of the sorrowing watchers, demanded something to eat. 'After this,' adds à Kempis, 'the most noble Master Florence lived for some years, to the consolation of all the Devout, both clerics and laics.'*

Yet all felt that the day, for them so full of sorrow,

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xix.

for him so joyous, had only been postponed for a time. When the end actually came, the holy priest was labouring under an illness that was perhaps less severe than many from which he had been rescued by the pious prayers of his devout disciples. But he himself knew that now at last the Lord was calling him, and accordingly he asked for the Holy Viaticum. And when he beheld the Sacred Host borne towards him, he exclaimed: 'O my beloved Lord God, forgive me; for I have so often so unworthily handled and received Thee!' And one of the Canons of Deventer who was standing by, hearing this, sighed deeply, saying: 'What, therefore, shall I, a miserable sinner, say when so holy a man thinks and speaks thus of himself?'

The dying Saint then exhorted his disciples to mutual charity, unquestioning obedience and simple humility, and then appointed as his successor Master Æmilius Buren. Having settled this and other matters of the like import, he quietly and lovingly prepared for the end.

'When, therefore, the most holy solemnity of our Lord's Annunciation (*sic*) was at hand, Florence, the most devout minister of Christ, and most tender lover of the ever Blessed Virgin Mary, the benign Mother of Jesus Christ, on the eve of the Feast of that same glorious Mother of God, after the compline hour, the Angelus bell having, as usual, pealed out in honour of the Blessed Virgin, the day being now passed away, finished the course of his life on earth, the Brethren praying around him with weeping and sorrow. . . . He passed from this world in the year of our Lord's

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xxviii.

Incarnation, 1400, in the Pontificate of Boniface IX., being, as I think, in the fiftieth year of his age, or not much older. . . . On the following day, therefore, the Canons and clerics gathering together, his poor body, worn out by long mortification, was carried in procession by the priests and Canons to the church of St. Lebuin, and the funeral rites having been performed, he was buried with great reverence before the altar consecrated in honour of St. Paul. But he, the chosen priest of God, as a truly humble servant of Christ, had desired to be interred in the cemetery with the Brothers who had died before him, and that no further honour should be shown to him. But the Reverend Master Rambert, the Dean of Deventer, absolutely refused this, and rather most justly decreed that he should be honourably laid in the church, and in a conspicuous place, seeing that he was a priest of the same church, illustrious in his virtues and renowned for his science.*

Such was the beautiful life, such the beautiful death, of the early benefactor and guide of our Venerable à Kempis. Our account of his career may seem to be somewhat long, but not longer, we trust, than the intrinsic beauty of such a biography permits or the exigencies of our narrative demand. Even now we have omitted many minor traits upon which our author dwells with affectionate prolixity, such, for instance, as his love for innocent children, in whom he beheld the beauty of a soul undefiled by sin; his cheerful kindliness to all who came to him with saddened hearts, 'which I have very often experienced in my own person,' remarks à Kempis; his delight

* '*Vita Florentii*,' c. xxviii.

in the study of the Scriptures and his deep learning therein, which, nevertheless, he was unwilling to display, except for the sake of edification; his ever-ready aptitude to take occasion of any trivial word or action to draw thence some spiritual good. We also omit various devout sayings of his and spiritual exhortations which Thomas scatters over the pages of his biography, as also a letter written by him to a Canon Regular of Windesheim, and a collection of his pious maxims which is given by our author at the end of his Life. Of these we need hardly say that they will well repay the perusal of such as have time and opportunity to read them, and that they are well worthy of the master and ideal of him who wrote the 'Imitation.'

In the last chapter of this memoir à Kempis recounts a vision which was granted to a certain devout widow, formerly a disciple of Radewyn, in which she was assured of the great glory the holy priest was then enjoying in heaven. Then he adds the following passage: 'When a certain person inquired concerning the great glory of Master Florence, he received this answer: "Especially because of three virtues. First, on account of the great love he possessed towards God, referring all things to Him as to his end, and seeking the honour and good pleasure of God in everything. Secondly, because of the zeal for souls which he exercised towards his neighbours, always desiring their salvation, and joyfully drawing them to the service of God. Thirdly, in reward for his great humility and contempt of self in ever regarding himself as little and contemptible." '*

* 'Vita Florentii,' c. xxix.

Who this 'certain person' might have been to whom this answer was vouchsafed we are left to conjecture. It would not, however, require much proof to convince us that it was the Venerable à Kempis himself, especially when we bear in mind the familiarity of his intercourse with our Divine Lord in his later days. I have already remarked that such signs of God's favour were frequently bestowed upon the early members of Gerard's holy Institute, and that Thomas was the happy recipient, certainly of some, and most probably of many, of those he himself records. We will close this chapter of our story and this period of the Venerable à Kempis' life with a brief account of two such heavenly visitations with which he was favoured whilst still a youth at Deventer.

The first has reference to the house of his holy Superior and of those Brethren whose lives we have sketched in the preceding pages, and although we are not certain that it occurred actually to Thomas, yet there are many intrinsic and extrinsic proofs that would induce us to believe so. However, we will give the story in his own words, and then the reader may judge for himself:

'One night a certain devout disciple, one who had but recently come under the care of Father Florence, terrified by an unwonted vision, at first was wholly overcome with fear, but in the end rejoiced in the wondrous goodness of God. While he was resting on his bed, behold! there came from the north a vehement wind, and a fearful tempest shook the whole earth, as if the day of the last judgment, so terrible to all flesh, was at hand. Trembling, there-

fore, before this terrific storm, the youth began to consider whither he should flee, and to what side he should turn from the face of the wrath of God. And so, taken in these straits, he lifted his eyes towards heaven, and lo! the sign of the Cross, representing the Author of man's salvation, appeared most distinctly in the air. At the sight of this holy image of the Crucified hanging with transfixed hands extended in the air, illuminating the whole world with its rays, the tempest was stilled. And the Cross advanced until it stood over the house of Master Florence, in which dwelt men who truly honoured the Cross and despised the world. And at the arrival and in the presence of this wonderful sign the whole house, as if going to meet our Saviour, was raised above the ground from its foundation into the air, so that it nowhere touched the earth; and having reverently bowed on one side towards the sacred symbol, it returned again to its usual position.

‘Seeing this, the young man began to pray with hands outstretched towards the Cross, craving protection from the terrors of the dreadful judgment. Immediately he was caught up from where he lay, and set down within the porch of the house of Master Florence, as in a place of security under the shadow of the Crucified. Then, being made exceedingly glad, and feeling safe from every peril, he was awakened by the excess of his ineffable joy. And, wondering greatly, he gave thanks to God, who had deigned to reveal such things to him concerning the Devout Brethren; and ever after he strove to cling closely to them and always to revere their life hidden in Christ.’*

* ‘*Vita Florentii*,’ c. xxi.

The second vision to which we referred is related by the anonymous author of a work entitled 'The Mirror of Examples,' and the extract that contains the present incident may be found at the beginning of Sommalius' edition of à Kempis. The story runs thus: While Thomas was studying at Deventer, he displayed signs of that loving devotion towards our Blessed Lady for which in later life he was so remarkable, and of which he gives such evident proofs in his writings. But it appears, as is often the case with the young and the fervent, his devotion outran his discretion. He added prayer to prayer in honour of his heavenly Queen, until his daily exercises became quite a burden to him, and he began to omit one after another, until finally he gave our Lady less than that with which he had commenced. Then one night he saw himself in a dream seated with other students in the hall of Father Florence's house listening with eager attention to some pious discourse. And, behold, the Mother of God appeared, all radiant and glorious, and, going round to the pious scholars, bestowed upon them one after another most loving embraces and caresses. Thomas awaited, trembling with expectant eagerness, hoping in his turn to receive some mark of her affection. But when Heaven's majestic Queen approached his seat she regarded him with a look of reproach, and asked him how he could expect a token of love after he had been so negligent in rendering her due service. And the pious child, awakening broken-hearted, questioned his conscience, recognised and lamented his fault, and immediately resolved amendment. Thenceforth to his dying hour he never allowed a day to pass without

performing his customary devotions to our Blessed Lady.

This beautiful and thoroughly Catholic legend is regarded by some Protestant biographers of à Kempis as of doubtful veracity. The chief reason assigned is that no mention of it is found in the early Lives of the Venerable Thomas. But such an omission would not be surprising, for these early writers afford us but scanty details, and they would most probably regard such a vision as one of many to be comprehended under some general statement, as that Thomas was favoured by several communications from Heaven. Moreover, this same anonymous author relates another vision as occurring to à Kempis, which à Kempis also narrates to us, but only, as usual, as happening to a 'certain Brother.'

Here is the story as given by Thomas, for we prefer always to quote his words, and in this case his account of the incident is the shorter: 'A certain Brother was accustomed in every affliction to call upon Jesus and upon His most holy Mother Mary. One night in his sleep he saw the devil coming towards him, as if wishing to injure him. Fearing some great harm, and unable to flee, he began in trembling accents to recite the "Hail Mary"; but when Satan heard the name of Jesus, at once he turned and began to flee and swiftly to run away. Perceiving this, the Brother cried still louder after him "Jesus, Jesus," and the louder he cried the swifter Satan ran, terrified by the sound of the sweet name of Jesus and of His Mother Mary. And, suddenly falling, he disappeared. Seeing this, the Brother awoke in the gladness of his heart, and said: "If with one 'Hail Mary' I

can put the devil to flight, what have I now to fear?"**

Now, if the anonymous writer whom we quoted above is proved trustworthy in the narration of this incident, why should not his word be taken as regards the truth of the other? Is it, perchance, that some are as afraid of the sweet name of Mary as is the devil himself, according to the words of à Kempis?

But it is time that, with our Venerable Thomas, we quit Deventer, and betake ourselves to Mount St. Agnes. I trust that from the preceding pages the patient reader has gathered a good idea of the influences and the surroundings amidst which the early life of à Kempis was passed, especially those seven happy and fruitful, though, perhaps, uneventful, years which he spent at Deventer, namely, from his thirteenth to his twentieth year, from A.D. 1392 to A.D. 1399.

Looking back for a moment now, we may picture to ourselves the humble, but pious and peaceful, homestead in the quaint little town of Kempen, where first he saw the light. We can see John Haemerken patiently and cheerfully employed in his daily toil; Gertrude, his wife, teaching the elements of letters and religion to the little ones of the town, but bestowing especial care on the training of her own darling boy. We recall the noble sacrifice of the aged couple as they parted with their little Samuel to lend him to the Lord. We see once more the sturdy lad manfully making his way to Deventer, and inquiring there for his brother John. We behold the happy meeting of the brothers. We remember his kindly

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars tertia, ii., 9.

welcome at the hands of Florence Radewyn, his admiration for the Devout Brethren, his studious attention at the schools, his recollectedness in the church, his admittance into the holy household of Father Florence, his quiet observation of the edifying examples he there beheld, his own proficiency in the way of perfection, in accordance with the admirable patterns he so closely studied. And now he stands before us, a youth of twenty summers, innocent as a child, simple, obedient, devout, without a thought for worldly amusements, desirous only of making progress in the love of his Divine Master, of acquiring that spirit of joyous devotion so characteristic of the school in which he had been trained.

A beautiful and lovable character in very truth ! And so thought also Father Florence, his saintly benefactor and director, and the thought made him the more anxious to provide for the future of his beloved pupil, for he felt that his own end was nigh. Accordingly, one Feast-day, as Badius Ascensius informs us, having noticed that his young disciple was more joyous than usual, the holy Superior called Thomas to his cell, and there delivered to him a beautiful little discourse. He reminded him that he had now come to the parting of the ways, that on one side lay the world, with its allurements and fleeting pleasures, ending in eternal death ; on the other the service of God, bringing true peace and solid joy in this life, and never-ending happiness in the next ; that whether he elected to serve God in the active or in the contemplative way of life, the cloister was safer and more suitable than the world ; and finally, that of all the religious families then existing in the

Church, that of the Canons Regular, living under the Rule of St. Augustine, was the best adapted to such as had been already trained with the Devout Brethren in the way of the Common Life.

Overcome with joy and surprise, Thomas at length stammers out his long-cherished desire to join his brother in the Windesheim Congregation. Father Florence graciously expresses his acquiescence; and the next day Thomas joyfully takes his departure for the newly-established Priory of Mount St. Agnes, of which his brother John was then Superior.

CHAPTER V

The story of Mount St. Agnes—John à Kempis—The arrival and reception of Thomas at the Mount—His probation



THE history of the founding of the Priory of Mount St. Agnes is a striking illustration of the growth and progress of the noble work that owed its existence to the combined efforts of those great servants of God, Gerard Groot and Florence Radewyn.

Among the many places visited by Gerard the Great in the course of his missionary labours was the thriving little town of Zwolle, in Holland. Here he effected some remarkable conversions, and even induced some to renounce the world and lead an Apostolic life, after the example of himself and his associates at Deventer. This handful of devoted men—consisting at first of three laics, John de Ummen, Wycham Rurink, and Reyner Leon, and one cleric, named Wittecoep—built themselves a house in the city, and therein led a devout and mortified life, the mother of John attending to their domestic needs. The townspeople, however, not understanding this new departure, constantly annoyed them with persecution and ridicule; and so when Gerard next visited the town, his disciples besought him to allow them to

settle somewhere outside Zwolle, in some retired spot wherein they might serve their Lord in peace. Gerard consented, and one day he went out with four of the Brethren to examine the neighbourhood in search of a suitable site for their future home.

The master and his four disciples directed their steps towards Mount Nemel, a wild, secluded spot, where they might well hope to be secure from any disturbance on the part of the citizens of Zwolle. They soon reached the summit, for the so-called mountains of this district are of no great elevation, and from that point of vantage they viewed the surrounding country. Then the Brothers eagerly pointed out to Groot a deep, narrow valley facing the north. 'Behold, dear master,' said they, 'what a quiet and suitable place that is for leading a life hidden in Christ, even as of old the hermit Fathers lay hid amidst rocky mountains and in the caverns of the earth.' 'And these words,' says à Kempis, 'they uttered out of the simplicity of their heart, in their fervent pursuit of devotion and in their desire for a more retired life, for they imagined that they ought to lie hidden there in a hut built of branches and twigs.' But the great Gerard to the guilelessness of the dove added also the wisdom of the serpent. He had no desire to see the good work commenced at Zwolle fail through the indiscreet zeal of its first promoters. And so, turning his eyes to the south, he called their attention to a level tract of land on the slope of the hill. 'Pitch your tent,' said he, 'near the foot of this mount, so that in the less rugged portion of its southern flank you may be able to cultivate a garden for herbs and

fruits. If the Lord grant me life, I shall often be with you here.'

'But that same year,' continues the pious chronicler, 'the beloved Master Gerard, the glory and the light of the devotion of his native land, Utrecht, was summoned from the world to receive the reward of his labours, and ascended from the valley of our mourning to the mountain of eternal bliss.'*

Gerard's work, however, was not suffered to die with him. In Zwolle, as at Deventer and elsewhere, generous hearts and willing hands were not wanting to carry on the glorious task he had so nobly begun. Two or three of the more influential citizens cast in their lot with the Devout Brothers; others interested themselves in their welfare, and before long a piece of land was obtained from two farmers, Bercmen and Nemel, in the very site indicated by Gerard Groot. A pious old lady left at their disposal a small cottage at the foot of the hill, and in this the Brothers and the workmen lived while they were building a more commodious habitation. Yet, even when finished, this first dwelling of the Devout Brethren was, in sooth, a sorry home. Its walls were built of mud and wood; its furniture was almost nil. But, full of a joyous trust in Divine Providence, these holy men gladly took up their abode therein.

The first Superior of this remarkable community, himself a most remarkable man, was John de Ummen. Blind and illiterate, he could see better, Groot once observed, than all the men in Zwolle. In fact, he ruled his subjects with a strong, yet sympathetic, hand. Under his prudent government, not only did

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' pp. 5, 6.

the Brothers increase in numbers and influence, they actually succeeded in building and establishing a monastery for their professed Brethren, the Canons Regular of Windesheim.

The first house on Mount Nemel, afterwards called Mount St. Agnes, was founded on ground handed over by deed of gift to the Brethren and their successors for ever by the two landowners Bercmen and Nemel, a year and a half after the death of Gerard the Great, A.D. 1386. Nine years later, on the vigil of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, their first chapel was consecrated by Hubert, the suffragan of Frederick, Bishop of Utrecht, and dedicated to St. Agnes. In the meantime, however, the Devout Brothers had suffered many privations, and had often been reduced to a state of utter destitution. But again and again did Divine Providence manifest in their regard that to those who seek first the kingdom of heaven all other things shall be added.

‘It happened once,’ says our Venerable Thomas, ‘that, nearly all the food having been consumed, Gerard the cook, solicitous for the morrow, made known his need to Father John in these sad words: “What shall I give to-morrow?” And he, gently consoling the distressed Brother, exhorted him to trust in the Lord, Who deserts not those that trust in Him. And when it was late that same day, lo, Master Everard of Eza, Curate of Almelo, arrived unexpectedly in his carriage, as if sent by the Lord for the consolation of His poor servants. He was received with all reverence and joy by the Brethren, and brought in as if it were his own home. For he loved the house and all that dwelt in it, because of

their sublime poverty and the simplicity of their lives; for they desired to do harm to no one, but good to all. He was also united by a special bond of charity to Father John. And so, whenever he was journeying to Windesheim or Zwolle, he first gladly paid a visit to the Brethren on the mount. Descending from his carriage, the exemplary pastor and skilful physician healed the souls of the poor with the food of the Holy Word, and cheered also their desponding hearts with the refreshment of which they stood in need. For he had brought with him some meat and some fine wheaten flour, and this he gave to the community. And this present having been offered and accepted, all were refreshed and strengthened, and gave thanks to God and to their compassionate benefactor, who had come to their assistance in a time of such great need.*

A Kempis relates, also, that on another occasion the Brothers had invited some poor clerics from Zwolle to assist them in their work, and that to provide for these numerous guests they went to fish in the River Vecht, which flows near the foot of the hill. They threw in the nets, calling on the holy name of Jesus, and they drew out as many fish as there were strangers to be entertained. He likewise tells us that a canon of Utrecht had made them a present of two cows, that one died, and that then the other gave more milk than they could have expected from both. Whereupon, with pious quaintness, he quotes that passage of Isaiah: 'And it shall come to pass in that day that a man shall nourish a young

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 15.

cow, and for the abundance of milk he shall eat butter' (Isa. vii. 21, 22).

Undismayed by this long struggle with poverty and want, the Community of Devout Brethren had no sooner settled down with some degree of comfort, as it were, possessed now of a little chapel of their own, than they began to seriously contemplate the building of a priory for such of their members as would wish to serve God in the religious state. In this project John de Ummen and the elder Brethren were especially keen. They saw clearly enough that their own Institute, the members of which were bound by no vow or promise, could not, in the natural course of things, long withstand the persecution of the worldly-minded, who regarded them with suspicion and dislike as being neither religious nor laymen, and the disintegrating elements which would doubtless arise from within. Accordingly they directed all their energies to the procuring of the materials necessary to make a start. Someone remarked that he wondered such poor men should think of founding a monastery and entering religion without endowments, but he was promptly silenced by a reply from John de Ummen: 'I have always heard from the Saints that poverty is good in itself, and the cause, moreover, and the promoter of every good.'*

The consequence of such zeal and determination was that in three years the Brothers were in a position to demand of the venerable Bishop of Utrecht, Frederick de Blankenheim, permission to erect a Priory of Canons Regular, living according to the Rule of the great St. Augustine. Their request

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 19.

was readily granted, and the required authority was given on January 18, A.D. 1398. They had always desired to found the new establishment near their own dwelling on Mount Nemel, or Mount St. Agnes as it was now called. In fact, they regarded the spot as specially designed for that purpose in the decrees of Divine Providence. For had not shepherds in their night-watches beheld men, clad in white, wend their way in procession around the hill? Had not the same vision been vouchsafed to the herdsmen in the vicinity of Windesheim? And had not the prophetic omen in that instance received its realization in the fact that the white-robed sons of St. Augustine had taken up their abode there, and were even now celebrating the gorgeous ritual of the Church with the devotion and splendour characteristic of their order? Why, then, should not the same vision receive the same fulfilment at Mount St. Agnes? Yet such was the opposition of the people of Zwolle that De Ummen and his associates deemed it prudent, at least, to bide their time. And so they accepted with gratitude a piece of land at Westerhoff, near Gherner, in the parish of Dalvessen, the generous gift of Egbert Mulart, an armourer of Hasselt.

At Westerhoff, therefore, they built a small house and church. The latter, with its cemetery and three altars, was consecrated by Bishop Hubert, suffragan of Frederick de Blankenheim, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1398. The church and the priory were placed under the invocation of the holy Mother of God, and the humble foundation was called, with poetical devotion, the Blessed Mary's Garden. On the same day, and in the presence of a large gather-

ing of religious, clerics, and laymen, Dom John Wale, the Prior of the Canons Regular in Zwolle, admitted to the Order of St. Augustine four of the Devout Brethren: Egbert de Linghen, who had been ordained three years previously; Wolfard Matthias de Medenblic, an aged priest; John Ummen, a cleric and a relation of John de Ummen, the Superior of the Brotherhood; and Deric Clive, a cleric from the city of Cleves. Egbert de Linghen was elected the Rector of the new religious, until a Prior should be appointed by the General Chapter at Windesheim. This Chapter was held soon after the Easter of the same year. The names of the four professed Brothers were then inscribed on the rolls of the Canons Regular of the Congregation; their little priory was also added to the list of those dependent on the mother-house at Windesheim, and a new Superior was sent to them, one Egbert Ringhe, formerly a Devout Brother, at that time a member of the Monastery of St. Saviour at Emsten.

John de Ummen had now attained the realization of his most earnest desires, the establishment of a house of Canons Regular, the first inhabitants of which were members of his own Community of the Devout Brotherhood. Yet all was not completed. That same year a pestilence broke out in the district of Zwolle, Deventer, and Campen, and it was discovered that the locality of Westerhoff was utterly unsuited for religious. Application was accordingly again made to the Bishop of Utrecht. The noble Frederick graciously granted them permission to transfer their community with all its rights and privileges to Mount St. Agnes. A few friends lent

them the aid of their protection, and on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, 1398, the Canons returned to their old habitation on the hill, leaving a few laymen in charge of the house at Westerhoff.

De Blankenheim had also given his consent that a cemetery should be consecrated near the new priory, and had sent his suffragan, Hubert, to Mount St. Agnes for that purpose. But the citizens of Zwolle once more displayed a fierce opposition. They refused to allow the suffragan to proceed beyond the town until their representative had been heard by the Bishop. This determination deprived the Canons of a cemetery for nearly a year. For De Blankenheim had gone to Rome, and both parties were obliged to await his return. When, however, he did return, he gave his decision in favour of the religious, and thus once more did this venerable prince of the Church show himself the friend and protector of the humble servants of Christ at Mount St. Agnes.

The consecration took place in the October of the year that à Kempis came to the Mount, hence he was an eye-witness of the ceremony. He evidently regarded it as an event of great interest and importance, for he devotes to it a whole chapter, the ninth, of his chronicle. 'In the same year, 1399,' he writes, 'after the Feast of St. Remigius (October 1), our Prior and Brethren, with the aid and advice of their friends, renewed their instance for the consecration of the cemetery, which had been long delayed on account of the impediments mentioned above. For, learning that his lordship of Utrecht had returned from the Court of Rome, they went to him in

Vollenhove, where he was then residing; and their most faithful friends Sweder of Rechteren and Master Hugo of Linge interceding for them, their petition was granted without any difficulty. Our most gracious lord, therefore, Bishop Frederick, sent word to his suffragan in all haste that he should proceed without delay and consecrate our cemetery on the Mount. And he, on reading his Metropolitan's letter, is found ready for the pious work. Immediately he set out with the messengers who had been sent to him, and on the morrow of the eleven thousand Virgins (October 21) he consecrated the cemetery within the cloister of the Monastery of St. Agnes, about the Vesper hour, in the presence of the Prior, and Brethren, and clerics, and dependents of our house. And when this had been duly performed, a gentle rain descended and watered the hallowed spot with heavenly dew. And all that dwelt on the Mount rejoiced with a great joy, because the Bishop had consecrated the place, and had thus publicly closed the mouths of our adversaries, who attempted to hinder the foundation and progress of the monastery.*

From this happy day may justly be dated that long career of spiritual and temporal increase and prosperity enjoyed by the community of Mount St. Agnes until its destruction amid the general ruin and devastation of the so-called Reformation. This continued prosperity was doubtless owing in a great measure to the fact that the priory was for so many years the home of the venerable author of the 'Imitation.' His fame spread far abroad, and attracted many to the scene of his life and labours. Numbers hastened to enrol

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' pp. 29, 30.

themselves in a community that possessed so bright a light of holiness and learning, and for many years after his death the remembrance of his virtues lingered as a sweet odour among the Brethren, while his writings carried on in the world the good work that had been effected by his words and example during life. But we should also bear in mind that the firm establishment and the early progress of the Priory were due especially to the prudence, energy, and zeal of Thomas's saintly brother John à Kempis.

The elder à Kempis, as we have already seen, was one of the pioneers of the first colony of the new Congregation at Windesheim. And now, when looking round for a man capable of placing on a firm basis the struggling Community of Mount St. Agnes, the reverend Fathers of the General Chapter agreed that they could not choose a better than Brother John. He received the honour with humility, accepted the burden with willingness, and executed his task with wondrous fidelity and success. Our venerable Thomas and his contemporary John Busch speak of him in terms of highest praise. We shall have occasion to return to the subject of his virtues later on. At present we will confine ourselves to the relation of his labours during his term of office at Mount St. Agnes. He was elected Prior by the Diet of Windesheim just after the Easter of 1399, and he continued to rule his poor but numerous family for nine years, that is, until A.D. 1408.

During that period, as Thomas himself informs us, he considerably bettered the condition of the priory in buildings, furniture, books, and other necessities. He built the greater part of the walls of the church

and prepared much wood for the completion of the roof. He began to lay out a garden for fruit and vegetables on the southern side of the cloister, and he planted wild shrubs around it. This is the very garden that Master Gerard Groot had pointed out as a fit place to grow vegetables. For a long time wheat was grown there, and afterwards it was planted with vegetables. In his days the mountains and the hills were laid low and the hollows of the valleys were filled up. Then verily, and to the letter, was fulfilled that which is read in Isaiah, and which was often quoted among the Brethren: *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be laid low, and the crooked shall become straight and the rough ways plain.*

‘It is not easy to say with what labour and sweat that hilly and sandy spot was reduced to a level, fertile plain. It was a long and difficult task to clear the ground for the church and the cemetery. For an elevation higher than the rest had stood there, and had covered the whole extent of the space that was required. Nevertheless, by degrees, and at different times, it was brought down to nothing, and was carried beyond the bounds to a deep valley towards the north, so that, to the wonder of many, not a vestige remained.

‘He also erected the following necessary buildings: A refectory for the Brethren, a refectory for the laics, a kitchen and a cellar; rooms also for the guests, and a sacristy for the preservation of things pertaining to Divine worship between the choir and the chapter-house. Among the labourers he himself was ever the foremost, wielding the trowel of mortar, or digging

the earth with a spade and throwing it on the barrow. In his spare time he devoted himself to spiritual reading, and was often likewise occupied in illuminating and writing books. He caused several books to be transcribed for the choir and the library. However, as they were still poor, he bade some Brothers write for money, as had been the custom from the early days. This task many of the Brethren zealously performed; others manfully gave themselves to the works outside.

‘In the days of this venerable man, our first Father and Prior, ten members were clothed, seven clerics and three lay Brothers. . . .’*

Among these seven clerics was Thomas himself, whom we left on his way to Mount St. Agnes, and to whom we will now return.

In the eighth chapter of the Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes we read the following item: ‘In the year 1399 the Apostolic indulgences were given to the people of Zwolle, which our Lord, Pope Boniface IX., granted for the building of the Church of St. Michael to all truly penitent on the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross and on the Feast of St. Michael.

‘The same year, I, Thomas à Kempis, a student of Deventer, born in the Diocese of Cologne, came to Zwolle for the indulgences. Thence I joyously proceeded to Mount St. Agnes and earnestly solicited to be allowed to remain in that place, and I was compassionately received.’†

From this passage it appears that Thomas arrived at Mount St. Agnes either in the May or in the

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ 27, 30.

† *Ibid.*

September of 1399. I am inclined to believe that it was in the autumn that he came. His brother had been appointed Prior only in the spring of the same year, and Thomas could scarcely have received the news of his election as early as May, yet it was the knowledge of that fact that caused the younger à Kempis to prefer the Mount to Windesheim, as we would naturally have expected, and as, moreover, we are positively assured by his biographer, Badius Ascensius.

The same writer represents the meeting between the two brothers as full of joy and fraternal affection. However, the discreet Prior did not allow too much of his love and satisfaction to be manifest on his countenance, but, assuming a serious tone, he said: 'I will try and examine you with regard to your studies, your health, and your behaviour, to see whether you are capable of bearing our burdens with us. And, giving him his hand,' continues Badius, 'he led him to the other novices.'*

And with the novices he remained nearly eight years. Six years he dwelt there without the habit; in the seventh he was clothed; and in the eighth year he was professed. On first thoughts this long probation will doubtless cause the reader some surprise. Nor will it altogether seem sufficient to remark that in those days of first fervour the young religious were usually subjected to a severe and protracted novitiate. For surely so long a term of training was not necessary for so exemplary and devout a youth as the younger à Kempis, who had already spent so many years under the careful guidance of Florence Radewyn, leading a

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' c. xii.

life as strict and mortified as that of a cloistered religious. The explanation of this delay is rather to be sought in the condition of the house in which Thomas was received as a postulant.

Recalling for a moment the foundation of the Priory of Mount St. Agnes, the reader will recollect that in the year 1398 it consisted of nothing but a small dwelling-house and a little chapel containing one altar, built by a few holy men, who were possessed of neither money nor friends. In the following year John à Kempis was sent from Windesheim to undertake the government of this poor religious family, which then numbered four professed members and four clerics. He was obliged, then, to start from the very beginning. There was no monastery worthy of the name, for this little house was provided with none of those offices so necessary to the regularity of the religious life : no garden, no buildings, no benefactors, no funds. In that same year he was joined by his younger brother, Thomas. John received him joyfully. It was not necessary, or possible, yet to clothe him as a religious, and to put him through the regular course of the novitiate ; but he would be very useful to the community, and would do more than his share to contributing to the support of the Brethren by transcribing books and manuscripts for sale. This he did and more. In the year 1402 he agreed with his brother, John, to sell their paternal homestead and to devote their little patrimony to the furtherance of the work on the Mount.

Now John first built all that was absolutely necessary for the priory, and then commenced the church. At the date of his departure (1408) the walls were stand-

ing, and the wood for the roof had been collected. This work in all probability would take about two years. Hence the priory was in a more or less complete condition about two years before John's departure, that is to say, A.D. 1406, the year in which Thomas was clothed. It is true that four other Canons were clothed before him, but two of these were already priests, and another had lived with some of the first disciples of Florence Radewyn at Deventer. John would naturally be careful not to give an occasion of murmuring by the premature reception into the novitiate of his own brother, who was still, comparatively speaking, so young.

The above explanation, which I have adopted from Eusebius Amort, is rendered still more probable by the parallel case of the delay of Thomas's ordination for another six years after his profession, for the simple reason that the priory as yet possessed no church of its own in which he could be conveniently ordained. The Church of St. Agnes was completed and consecrated in A.D. 1412, and Thomas was made priest the following year, A.D. 1413.

Nevertheless, long as his probation undoubtedly was, of this we may be sure: its duration seemed neither tedious nor irksome to the youthful à Kempis. His life as a novice, divided between prayer, sacred studies, and the transcription of holy authors, in complete submission and immediate dependence on his Superior, was such as would exactly suit his naturally quiet, docile, and studious disposition, purified and exalted as it was by the workings of Divine grace. To those familiar with the pages of the 'Imitation' many passages will occur in which

the Venerable à Kempis praises the state of humble subjection under the government of a Superior, enumerates the advantages of the religious life, and utters a note of warning against the foolishness of those who, wearying of the burden they have assumed, strive to withdraw themselves by one means or another from the obedience they owe to their Prelates.

And certainly on this last point the reader will readily acknowledge that Thomas had a right to speak with authority. For nearly seven years, in the freshness of his youth—a time when men are usually so eager and impatient in their desires—he waited calmly and patiently for the happy day that would see him clad in the white habit he loved so well. During this period, moreover, he was living, as it were, in an unsettled condition, a state of suspense which would have proved intensely trying to a soul less resigned and confident in God. He was bound by no other ties to the Community of which he formed a member than that of charity. Absolutely speaking, they were free to dismiss him at any moment, and he, on his side, was free to go whenever he chose. However, that nothing was further from the thoughts of the Brethren or of the lowly postulant himself is sufficiently proved by the deed of gift which he made, and which they accepted, of his humble inheritance.

Moreover, though he was as yet unfettered by the vows of religion, it has been justly surmised from a passage in one of his works that he anticipated the day of his solemn profession by making a private dedication of himself to God. ‘By Thy vocation,’

he writes, 'I was snatched from the shipwreck of the world, and was even permitted to associate with Thy followers in order to serve Thee. And lest I should go back again, of my own will I bound myself by vow. Which assuredly I attribute not to my merits, but to Thy providence.'*

Thus these six and a half years seem to have slipped by in great peace and happiness, unmarked by any stirring or untoward event, marked only by the gradual increase and prosperity of the young Community under the able management of the elder à Kempis, varied also occasionally by the edifying death of one or other member, as reverently recorded by the pious pen of our Venerable Thomas, and varied for Thomas himself, amidst his daily occupations of prayer, reading and transcribing, by that ebb and flow of spiritual sweetness and desolation with which all acquainted with the phases of the interior life are so familiar.

Every step by which God is wont to conduct His elect to the sublime heights of intimate union with Himself is described by à Kempis with a vividness that perhaps has never been surpassed. Throughout his mystical works, as in the Psalms, sometimes we hear the shrill cry of a soul in the deepest distress; anon the heart is stirred to its depths by the full-voiced note of jubilee and exaltation; and again we strain our ears to catch the faint accents of a soul languishing with love in the sweetness of the Divine embrace. All this we find so graphically portrayed that we feel we are being taught by one who has experienced in himself those tender emotions and those

* 'Solil. Animæ,' c. xxv., 11.

delicate changes of temperament with which he is so thoroughly acquainted.

And yet, personally, I would not go so far as to say that a chapter on spiritual aridity, for instance, would be written by Thomas while actually groping in the darkness wherein the soul finds herself enveloped when God withdraws the light of His countenance. No; I would say, rather, that à Kempis was so well versed by his own experience of God's dealings with himself that in his calmer moments he could sit in his cell and write for the instruction and comfort of himself and others the thoughts suggested by the periods of trial or consolation through which he had passed, the lessons he had therein received, and the inspirations most suitable for each varying phase.

And therefore I would deem that the attempt to trace the successive stages of the inner life of à Kempis by means of his mystic works would in the end be discovered to rest for the most part on conjecture, an opinion which is considerably strengthened by the fact that our knowledge of the chronological order of those writings must be based chiefly on internal evidence.

Let those, then, who would wish to study the interior life by one of its greatest masters by all means have recourse to the works of à Kempis. Therein they will find that not a single contingency of all that may befall a man in his endeavours to attain a closer union with his Maker is left without a lucid and soul-satisfying exposition. But the prudent biographer who is writing with a view to the instruction and edification of the general reader will not strive to weave a more or less fanciful story of

temptation, trial, combat, and victory, but will confine himself to the broad line of historical fact, allowing himself, nevertheless, from time to time a dip beneath the surface to discover and to illustrate from his hero's own words the influence which outward events exercised upon his inner life.

CHAPTER VI

The clothing and the profession of a Kempis—Some account of the Canons Regular—The grace of vocation

WHEN the building of the priory had progressed sufficiently to allow the duties of the novitiate to be carried out with due regularity, Thomas learnt from his brother that he might now soon hope to don the white habit of the Canons. The whole ceremony of the reception and clothing of a novice is minutely described in chapter i, part iii., of the Statutes of Windesheim, as preserved for us by Eusebius Amort.* Perhaps an account of the investiture of Thomas, founded on this authority, may not be out of place here or without its interest for the reader.

Prior John, then, seeing that the monastery was now fairly complete, informed his brother and two other postulants, a cleric and a lay-brother, that they were free to make their formal application for the habit of the order. They, therefore, appeared before the Chapter of the House when next it assembled, and prostrated themselves at the feet of the Prior. 'What do you seek?' he asked. 'God's mercy and your fellowship,' was the response. The Superior

* 'Vetus Disciplina,' pp. 539-608.

then bade them rise from the ground. They rose from their prostrate position, but still remained on their knees.

Then the members of the Chapter questioned them closely as to their freedom from any obligations in the world and from canonical impediments. When these inquiries had been satisfactorily answered, the Prior proceeded to point out to the postulants the gravity of the step which they contemplated, the hardships of the life which they wished to embrace, and the severe punishments inflicted on those who failed in the strict observance of their obligations. These thoughts, however, had been already rendered familiar to the young tyros. In reply to the Superior's question whether they still persevered in their request, the answer would be that they trusted by the grace of God and the aid of the prayers of the Brethren to fulfil all the duties which he had laid before them. 'God grant that you may fulfil them all, and thereby gain eternal life,' was the response. Then the Prior, taking the hands of each of the postulants successively in his own, gave to each, as it were, the freedom of the monastery in these words: 'In the name of God and in our own name we receive thee and grant thee our fellowship.' The day of their clothing was then announced, and the postulants withdrew.

In the case of our Venerable Thomas, the choice of the feast which was appointed for the ceremony must have greatly enhanced his joy on the occasion. This was no other than the Festival of Corpus Christi. When we remember the great devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament for which à Kempis was distinguished, and which he expresses throughout his

works, but nowhere more vividly than in the Fourth Book of the 'Imitation,' we can well imagine that he regarded his solemn admission into the novitiate and his reception of the religious habit on that beautiful feast as a most happy omen, a sign that henceforth he was to dedicate himself more unreservedly than ever to the service of the glorious King Whose livery he wore.

As the great day approached, Thomas prepared himself with ever-increasing fervour for the worthy reception of the holy habit of religion. To this end, in accordance with the constitutions of the Congregation and with the universal custom of religious orders, he purified his soul by a thorough examination of conscience, a sincere sorrow—how sincere and heartfelt only those can realize who are familiar with his writings—and a general confession of his whole life. Yet how pure that conscience must have been! How slight the matter for absolution! What knew this gentle postulant of sin? Where had he even met an occasion of falling? Surely not in his innocent childhood, passed under the fostering care of his pious parents at Kempen! Surely not in his youthful days at Deventer, in the holy company of Father Florence and his Devout Brothers! Surely not at Mount St. Agnes itself, the home of religious poverty, regularity, fervour, and devotion!

Nevertheless, Thomas himself speaks of his failings as most heinous crimes; but here again we recognise the humility and the purity of the man of God. We are apt to wonder sometimes how the Saints could really and sincerely regard themselves as most sinful men; but we should remember that the soul which is

closely united with God, and 'in His light seeth light,' beholds in the infinity of the Divine perfection the hideous deformity of even a venial sin. Thus we can appreciate the following expressions of deep sorrow for past offences and for present failings to which à Kempis gives utterance in one of his earliest works, '*The Soliloquy of the Soul*,' a treatise upon which he was most probably engaged at this very time.

'O my God!' he cries, 'I have stained my life with many sins; but behold my tears, which I pour out in Thy sight because of them. For I know that good doth not abide in me, and that as long as I bear about a mortal body I am not free from sins. Therefore do I do evil and sin every day, and, what is worse, I suffer many sins to pass by without lamentation and worthy contrition; for, being so often intent upon, and entangled in, exterior concerns and vain curiosities, I cannot so speedily return to salutary weepings. Therefore is the darkness of sin so greatly increased within me, impeding grace, and depriving me of Divine consolation. Is this a small evil? It is a great evil, my God, and becomes the greater the more speedily the remembrance thereof passes from my heart, without leaving there the sting of remorse.

'Spare me, O Lord, spare me! for it is not strange that, touched by interior sorrow, I weep, since it is the time for weeping. Happy hour wherein sorrow for sin is born within me! Happy tears which flow from the vehemence of grief, when every stain of the heart had been examined.

'But who is able to search fully this abyss and to discover these hidden stains? My God, true Light,

Thou art able to illumine all the darkness of my heart and to burn away all its deformity in the spirit of fire and judgment. Thine it is to give a new heart, to create a clean heart, and to prepare there a secret chamber, that it may be made the place of Thy repose and the tabernacle of Thy name, Who art the Lover of purity and the Guest of a good conscience. . . . O Lord God, the Giver of all grace, grant me worthily to weep for even the slightest offences, and to punish myself without excuse for all my transgressions, both those that lie hid and those that are known. May this intercourse between me and Thee restore to me the grace which I have lost, and obtain for me graces still greater and more conducive to salvation.*

Purified by such sentiments of sincere repentance, on the morning of the day assigned, Thomas repaired to the sacristy with his two companions, after the hour of tierce had been chanted in choir. There the community also assembled, and the postulants were soon divested of their secular attire and clothed in the beautiful habit of the order. Then a procession was formed, and all proceeded to the sanctuary. The Canons knelt in their stalls, the Prior, assisted by deacon and subdeacon, knelt before the altar, the three postulants lay prostrate on the ground. The hymn to the Holy Ghost, *Veni Creator*, was sung, the Prior chanted the versicle, *Emitte Spiritum Tuum*, the choir responded, and then followed two Collects. After this the novices received the kiss of peace, from the Superior first, and then from the Brethren in due order. The celebrant and the ministers proceeded with the Mass; at the Communion the newly-

* 'Solil. Animæ,' c. iii.

clothed tyros received the Bread of Life, and henceforth they possessed a recognised place as true religious, as members of the Community.

But, though acknowledged members of the Community, they were as yet the humblest of its subjects. Everything combined to remind them that they were, so to speak, on trial. They had now every opportunity of learning whether they could acquire those habits of obedience, humility, regularity, and detachment that are so absolutely necessary in the religious life. Even their distinctive attire served to the same end. Then, as now, the novice's rochet (a plain linen surplice) was unadorned with sleeves, to signify that he had not yet bound himself by the vows of religion; whereas the rochet of the professed Canon always had long sleeves, sometimes loose, and sometimes closely fitting.

Another distinction in the habit of a novice of those days, which, however, no longer exists, was that the tyro was not allowed to wear the amess. This amess, according to Molinet,* was originally a head-dress descending to the shoulders, worn winter and summer. After a time it was felt to be rather a cumbersome headgear, and was allowed to fall to the shoulders. There, in the course of time, it assumed the form of a cape, sometimes clasped on the breast, sometimes fastened the whole depth of the front, sometimes hanging on the shoulders like a shawl. The material of which it was made was usually the skin or fur of some animal; that of the Canons Regular was of lamb's wool, white for summer, black for winter, and they were forbidden to use the skin of any wild beast.

* 'De l'Habit de Chanoines,' etc., pp. 13, 14.

The amess survives to-day in the cape worn by the Secular Canons.

All the representations which I have seen of the Canons of Windesheim shows them with the amess closed over the breast; but the portraits of the Venerable à Kempis that remain to us picture him wearing the shawl variety, so to speak. These portraits also represent him with the long rochet and loose sleeves, and under that the white cassock. On his head he wears a cap, or bonnet, the forerunner of the present biretta. In winter the Canons wore a long black cappa, or cloak, which could be well folded round the person. They were taught also to consider their habit as symbolical of their profession; the white cassock and rochet signified the purity of heart and soul which was required of them; and the cappa of black, the colour of mourning, their renunciation of the world and all that it contains.

The account of his own happy clothing in this ancient habit is thus simply recorded by Thomas in his Chronicle: 'In the year of the Lord 1406, on the day of the Sacrament, which that year fell on the vigil of St. Barnabas (June 10), two clerics and one lay Brother were clothed: Thomas Haemerken, of the town of Kempen, of the diocese of Cologne, the brother-german of John Kempen, the first Prior, whose father was named John and whose mother was called Gertrude; also Octbert Wild of Zwolle, whose father was called Henry and whose mother was called Margaret; also Arnold Droem, a lay Brother from Utrecht, who brought many goods to the monastery, and who was the refectorian.'*

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' pp. 31, 32.

In reality for Thomas the year of probation which followed this clothing would not much differ from the years of probation which had preceded. He had been already leading the life of a novice for nearly seven years. All that now remained for him was to excite within himself renewed fervour, and to make, as it were, the most of that precious time that was still to intervene before he should assume definitely the solemn obligations of religion.

His sentiments at this period may be gathered from the following passage, taken from his 'Dialogue of Novices,' written, indeed, some years later, but expressing, as do all his other works, his own thoughts and resolutions :

'Therefore have I left the world,' he says, 'and the things that are in the world, in order that in the religious state I may more fully learn and accomplish the will of God, that I may live more secure from the dangers of temptation, and that, having at length completed the journey of this life, I may merit to obtain, with the faithful followers of Christ, the rewards of eternal beatitude.

'For I intend henceforth to order my whole life to the service of God, and to spend in religion the modicum of time that remains to me. Wherefore I am ready to endure every labour, and to obey the precepts of my elders, which they have framed for my salvation and perfection, as becomes a novice, and as the religious state demands.'*

This last year of probation, then, speedily passed by, and again the Feast of St. Barnabas approached. On that day, June 11, our Venerable Thomas pro-

* 'Dialogus Novitiorum : De contemptu mundi.'

nounced his religious vows. Of this fact we are assured by his biographer, the Canon Regular, Tolensis. In the Chronicle itself we find no mention of the event. For à Kempis evidently considered it sufficient to note the date on which each Canon was clothed as a novice, giving us to understand that religious profession would follow in due course, and that which he did not record of others he would certainly never dream of recording of himself. The reader will doubtless be glad to receive some account of the ceremony of profession as in use among the Canons of Windesheim. We take it from the same source whence we derived the details of the clothing of a novice, namely, the 'Vetus Disciplina' of Eusebius Amort.

When the year of final probation had almost elapsed, the novice was called before the Chapter of the house, and questioned whether he still desired to enter religion, a full and free permission being given to return to the world. Should he persevere in his request to be admitted into the order, he was bidden to prepare himself for Holy Communion, and a piece of parchment was handed to him with instructions to inscribe thereon his vows.

The profession itself took place during the Conventual Mass, on the anniversary of the clothing, or the day following. After the offertory the novice was brought to the altar steps, and there he lay prostrate while his canonical rochet and amess were being blessed. He was then divested of the short-sleeved rochet of the novice and clothed in the long-sleeved rochet and the amess of the Canon. A prayer was recited, and after that the novice, rising, cried aloud

thrice: 'Receive me, O Lord, according to Thy word, and I shall live, and do not confound me in my hope.' The Prior intoned the antiphon, 'We have received, O Lord, Thy mercy in the midst of Thy temple,' and three Psalms, the 47th, the 50th, and the 132nd, were chanted by the choir. A few versicles and responses and a collect followed, and then the novice, taking his stand at the Epistle side of the altar, read in a clear voice his profession of the three vows of religion in the following terms:

'I, Brother N., promise, by the help of God, perpetual chastity, renunciation of property, and obedience to thee, Father Prior, and to thy successors, canonically appointed, according to the Rule of Blessed Augustine, and according to the constitutions of our General Chapter.'

He then placed the parchment on the altar, kissed the altar, and, returning to the lowest step, again prostrated. Thrice the Prior repeated the versicle, 'Confirm, O Lord, that which Thou hast wrought in us,' and thrice the choir took up the refrain, 'From Thy holy temple, which is in Jerusalem.' A prayer was sung, and then the newly-professed Canon was admitted to the kiss of peace.

There is something very solemn in the stern simplicity of this ceremony and in the brevity of those words that meant and entailed so much. What that short formula did entail is sufficiently indicated in the significant clause that is added to the above regulations, in the statutes from which we have been quoting: 'From the time that he is received, let him understand that he is cut off from all things that are in the world, so that, without the authority of the

Prior, he has power over nothing whatever, not even over himself.*

And that such, indeed, was the mind and intention of à Kempis when he pronounced his vows, is manifest from the following beautiful prayer, in which he expresses his utter detachment from all that the world can offer and his firm resolve and loving desire to cling to God and to God alone.

‘O my Lord Jesus Christ,’ he cries from the depths of his burning heart, ‘my hope and my only refuge, the comfort of my life and the model of my ways, this day, for the love of Thee, I renounce all things that are in the world, and this I desire to accomplish unto the glory of Thy name. I renounce all my friends, relations, and kinsfolk; all that are near and dear to me; all my acquaintance and companions; also all cities, towns and hamlets, hills and valleys, rivers and springs, fields, meadows, and woods; all beautiful and ornate buildings; all psalteries, harps, organs, music, songs, flowers, and scents; all amusements, friendship, banquets, conversations, visits, greetings, honours, and all the pleasures of human fellowship; all idle talk, news, plays, jokes, laughter, wanderings, discourses, noise, and useless occupations; all riches, goods, property, offices, dignities, exterior consolations, and all things whatsoever whereby the flesh may be tempted, drawn away, and flattered, and the spirit impeded and defiled.

‘Thee this day I choose as my God and protector, the ruler of my life, my provider in every need, my comforter in every sorrow, distress, and temptation, and in all the labours wherein I must toil during the

* ‘Vetus Disciplina,’ p. 576.

number of my days, for the love of Thee and the salvation of my soul. Thou art my refuge, my home, my city, my country; Thou art to me food, drink, rest, and refreshment; Thou art my beloved companion, my intimate friend, my kinsman and relation, my brother and sister, my father and patron; Thou art the shepherd and guardian of my whole life, and to Thee I trustfully commend myself and all that is mine, for, outside of Thee there is no salvation, nor is life secure without Thee. Let, therefore, Thy mercy be upon me, O Lord, and let Thy grace accompany me in all my ways; let Thine eye be upon me day and night; let Thy hand ever protect me on the right and on the left. And do Thou deign to lead me along the path of righteousness to the home of the indwelling of Thy glory, where I may merit to praise and bless Thee for ever. Amen.*

With such edifying dispositions, then, did the Venerable à Kempis enter upon the sixty years and more that he spent at Agnetenberg as a professed Canon Regular of St. Augustine. But what is a Canon Regular? A question that does not seem inopportune when we remember how little is known nowadays of this ancient order, on whose glorious rolls of saintly and learned men, canonized and uncanonized, famous or almost totally unknown, the name of the author of the 'Imitation' is but one among many; and when we find some biographers of à Kempis speaking of him as an Augustinian friar, whereas, in reality, there is as much difference between a Canon Regular and a friar, or hermit, of St. Augustine, as between a Jesuit and a Franciscan.

* 'Orationes Piæ,' Oratio Prima.

This confusion of ideas is due chiefly to the fact that both the Canons Regular and the hermits are intimately connected with the great St. Augustine of Hippo, and his name is frequently employed to designate them both. But here the similarity ceases. When Augustine returned to Africa after his conversion, he retired to his own country property near Tegaste, and there led with a few kindred spirits a life of penance, seclusion, and prayer. But when afterwards he was ordained priest and then consecrated Bishop, being no longer able to live as a hermit, and yet unwilling to relinquish the sweet consolations of the religious state, the holy Prelate revived among his own clerics that common Apostolic life which he had seen flourishing in Rome and also at Milan in the palace of his friend St. Ambrose. With these, his clergy and brother religious, he lived in common, and to them he gave a code of laws, founded principally on the manner of life adopted by the primitive Christians at Jerusalem, as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

Meanwhile, his first community had greatly increased in numbers, and had already commenced to send out colonies over the North of Africa. After Augustine's death, these monks continued to flourish and multiply until the ravages of the Vandals well-nigh extinguished the whole order. Some few, however, escaped to Italy, and there, in the twelfth century, Innocent III. found the institute still existing. He encouraged its members to dwell in cities, for they still clung to the solitary life which had been adopted by their founder and his first companions, and from which they derived and still retain the name of

hermits. Innocent's successor, Honorius III., approved of the order, and, some twenty years later, Innocent IV. incorporated with it four similar congregations. This union was completed and confirmed by his immediate successor, Alexander IV., A.D. 1254. Thus, then, the monks, or friars, or hermits of St. Augustine trace back the history of their order through its various vicissitudes to its origin in the little monastery where that great doctor of the Church sought, though in vain, to live with his more intimate friends a life of penance in retirement and obscurity.

Not so, however, the Canons Regular. They trace back their origin much farther in antiquity. Their Institute, they maintain—and their contention is supported by the authority of Popes, theologians and Church-historians—was founded by Christ Himself, when He gathered together and trained in the religious life the College of the Apostles. That same religious life the Twelve instituted among their first disciples in Jerusalem, and afterwards carried with them over the whole world, though then, of course, its practice was chiefly restricted to the clergy. Through the first centuries of the Christian era this Apostolic rule of life was still observed by a great number of ecclesiastics, chiefly by Bishops and their immediate attendants, the Canons.

Such, in general, was the state of affairs when St. Augustine ascended the episcopal throne of Hippo. He, however, saw that amid the increasing wealth of the Church, this community life of poverty and obedience could not long subsist even among the Bishop's clergy, if supported only by tradition, and

accordingly he drew up for the guidance of his own clerics a set of regulations, since known as the Rule of St. Augustine. This Rule was soon adopted by a great number of Prelates, and was carried into Italy and France by St. Augustine's disciples.

The religious life was still observed, though with numerous and frequent defections, by the great bulk of the cathedral Chapters, until the eleventh century, when, once for all, the distinction was made between those who wished to retain private property and those who were willing to persevere under a rule in community life. The former were now denominated Secular, the latter Regular, Canons. This separation seems to have been much to the advantage of those that still maintained the ancient discipline. At that time a great number of Congregations of Canons Regular sprang into existence, each with its own distinctive constitutions, but almost all taking for their fundamental rule the regulations drawn up so many centuries before by the great Bishop of Hippo. This latter fact explains why the whole order has since then been known as that of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine.

This diversity of Congregations, however, has also added somewhat to the prevailing confusion of ideas concerning the Canons Regular. Yet that there should be such diversity is but natural in the circumstances. For the other orders—for instance, that of the Benedictines or of the Dominicans—being founded each by some individual Saint, who prescribed for his disciples, often even in the minutest details, the manner of life they should follow and the habit they should wear, have been enabled to preserve great external union

and uniformity. But the Canonical Institute, taking its rise in the College of the Apostles, and established by them in different countries with regulations suited to the age and climate, and since their day again and again restored and revived by Bishops and Abbots and other holy men, each of whom drew up his particular code according to the kingdom and period in which he lived, has ever presented a wondrous variety, in which, nevertheless, essential characteristics have always been preserved.

And the essential characteristics, whereby a Canon Regular is distinguished from a monk, may be summed up in this : the clerical state belongs of its own nature to the order of Canons, whereas it is only accidental to the monastic orders. If to-day three-fourths, or more, of the Benedictines, Carthusians, or Franciscans, were laics, as indeed they were in earlier times, they would still be true monks of St. Benedict, St. Bruno, or St. Francis ; but if in a Community of Canons Regular the majority were not clerics, the canonical order would no longer be truly represented there, for, as St. Thomas Aquinas aptly expresses it,* a Canon Regular is, *per se*, a cleric.

With the origin of the Windesheim Congregation of the canonical order the reader is already acquainted. Gerard Groot, as so many before him, found the order of Canons Regular already existing, and perceived in it elements that rendered it most suitable for the end he had in view. And though he did not live to prosecute the grand design which he had conceived, yet, as we have seen, his last wishes were faithfully executed by his devoted disciples. Six of these

* 'Summa Theologica,' 2.2. q. 189, a. 8. ad 2.

founded a house at Windesheim, and then sailed across the Mediterranean to the monastery of Eymsteyn, an offshoot of the Priory of Blessed John Ruysbroeck at Groenendael, to receive there a training in the regular and canonical life, 'which,' quaintly observes John Busch, 'cannot be fully acquired except by personal experience and constant practice.'*

On their return these holy men received the habit of the Canons Regular and pronounced the three vows of religion. From them sprang the Windesheim Congregation, which soon became a model of regularity and discipline to all the various religious bodies in the Lowlands, and before long absorbed into itself all the canonical houses in Holland and Belgium, amongst others the famous Priory of Groenendael. It weathered well the storm of the Reformation, and continued to flourish, until, with so many other holy Institutes, it met its doom in the widespread devastation of the French Revolution. The last General Chapter of the Congregation was held in the year 1792, its last Superior-General died January 17, 1807, its last Canon departed about the year 1816.

This was the Congregation that the youthful à Kempis so ardently desired to embrace. Trained with Gerard's disciples at Deventer, he longed with all the fervour of his loving heart to dedicate himself to God in the more perfect state of the regular life. The accomplishment of this his desire he always considered one of the chief blessings vouchsafed to him by Heaven in the course of his long and saintly career.

* 'Chron. Wind.,' p. 50.

‘ See your vocation, brethren,’ he exclaims, quoting the words of St. Paul (1 Cor. i. 26, 27), ‘ that there are not many wise nor many mighty, but the foolish things of the world hath God chosen. . . .

‘ For this I would exceedingly praise and bless Thee, that Thou hast deigned to call me by Thy grace, bestowing on me a good will, and relieving me of the burden of my sins. For Thou hast brought me under Thy sweet yoke, softening my mind with the unction of Thy Spirit, Whom the world knoweth not, nor seeth, nor understandeth. Preserve in me, O Lord, this good will, and increase the gifts of Thy grace as long as I dwell in the light of this day. I feel this vocation to be a great gift, which is not given to all, but to those for whom it is prepared by the Father. For this is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy ; so that every mouth speaking vain things may be stopped, and that no flesh may glory in Thy sight, nor anyone impute anything to himself, as of his own merits or good works. For if Thou hadst willed to deal with me according to Thy justice, I should now be numbered with those that burn in Hell.

‘ I am obliged, therefore, to render great thanks for so signal a favour, and would that I could make a worthy return to Thee in word and deed all the days of my life. Nevertheless, I beseech Thee that, in place of thanksgiving, Thou accept my poor service, wherewith I desire, and in gratitude am bound, to serve Thee. Grant that the debt of service which I owe Thee may in its beginning proceed from, and in its completion tend towards Thy good pleasure and honour, and permit not my heart to be ever turned

from Thy love. But may my soul and my body together wax strong and persevere unshaken in Thy most holy service as long as the breath of life remains within me, and I am conscious of myself, and able to remember Thee. May Thy praise never depart from my lips, nor the memory of the abundance of Thy benefits ever fade from my heart. And if Thy servant should live for many years, yea, a hundred or a thousand years, he will not therefore grow weary or afraid of serving Thee. Rather I will at all times serve Thee as devoutly and willingly as in that hour and on that day when first my heart was moved and strengthened by Thee to follow Thee, its Lord, with a pure and undivided intention. Nor will this purpose be shaken by any sickness or adversity that may befall me ; but as I now purpose and resolve in Thy hearing, O my God, so, with Thy help, do I desire to accomplish that which has once proceeded from my lips.

‘ But if through any frailty or fault this resolution be broken (for there is no man on earth so perfect as to live and not to sin), still, I will not lose confidence nor abandon Thee ; but at once I will bow the knees of my heart, offering to Thee, with much sorrow and many tears, my saddened and wounded conscience, that Thou mayest heal it by the medicine of Thy grace, and mayest bind it to its purpose even more strongly than before. Nor will I repent of my holy undertaking ; rather I will give thanks that at least once I merited to receive from Thee this favour of making a covenant with Thee to serve Thee for ever. But thou, O merciful and omnipotent God, Who didst create me out of nothing, and Who from the beginning

foreknewest the weakness and the fall of man, Thou art able in Thy great love to forgive me all my evil deeds, to compensate for my omissions, to restore my losses, to cure my wounds, to cleanse away my stains, to enlighten my darkness, to bring low my swelling pride, to re-enkindle my dying fervour, to repair all breaches, to recover neglected opportunities, to straighten crooked ways, to smooth rough paths, to restrain my curiosity, to repress my vanity, to moderate my inordinate desires, and, in a word, to change the whole state of my soul for the better, so that nothing may be wanting of my first purpose, and that even every occasion of sin may work unto my good by bringing me humbled to Thy feet. This is a change of the right hand of the Most High. This is a heavenly visitation. This is a manifold outpouring of Divine compassion.*

* 'Solil. Animæ,' c. xxv., n. 11.

CHAPTER VII

Resignation of Prior John—Some account of his successor, William Vorniken—Items from the Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes—Interior life of à Kempis—His Ordination—The ‘Imitation’



DURING the seven years that elapsed between the religious profession of our Venerable à Kempis and his ordination to the priesthood occurred many events of great interest to himself and to the community on the Mount. All these he faithfully records in his Chronicle of St. Agnes.

The first event in chronological order, and perhaps also the first in importance, was the resignation of the elder à Kempis and the election of William Vorniken in his stead as Prior of Agnetenberg. This momentous change took place about eighteen months after Thomas had pronounced his vows. John returned to the mother-house at Windesheim, in the hope, maybe, of enjoying a little repose after his fatiguing labours in the superintendence of the struggling colony on Mount St. Agnes. This rest, however, was of short duration. His well-known energy and talent as a pioneer were soon again in requisition, and he was sent with a few companions to establish the Priory of St. Peter's Pool, near Bommel.

Meanwhile, his successor, William Vorniken, took up the work on the Mount at the point where Prior John had left it, and carried it forward with untiring energy and marked success for the period of seventeen years. Thomas gives us the following summary of the material progress made in the priory during his term of office: 'He roofed the church, and had new stalls made for the choir; he also procured some beautiful vestments to be worn by the priests and ministers on great festivals. He enlarged the bounds of the cloister, and surrounded the whole monastery with a stone wall. He built a new house for the husbandmen, and also a sheepfold near the gate; and in the year of his departure he began to erect a bakery and a brewhouse. In several places he planted various kinds of fruit-trees, and he brought level with the ground the hillocks, which still remained in great numbers, and carried away the sand of which they were composed. He had the altars beautified with pictures, and caused several books to be written for the choir and for the cloister. In all this, nevertheless, he loved poverty and simplicity, and he himself illuminated many volumes. In his charity, he allowed several laymen to dwell with us, in order that they also, by faithfully persevering in holy labours and living under obedience, might merit to receive the rewards of eternal life. Of these, some he received as oblates; to others he gave the habit of lay brothers.'* The venerable chronicler then tells us that, while Prior at Agnetenberg, Father William invested fourteen clerics, whose names and native towns he also records.

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 35.

À Kempis remarks in this place that Prior Vorniken was a lover of poverty and discipline, and says nothing further of his habits, or character ; but his silence on the subject is amply compensated by the enthusiastic eulogies of his contemporary, Busch, the chronicler of Windesheim. For, after seventeen years of constant and faithful labour on the Mount, William Vorniken was elected Prior of the mother-house at Windesheim and consequently Superior-General of the whole Congregation. This onerous post he held until the day of his death, some thirty years later, and hence John Busch had more opportunities of knowing him intimately than even à Kempis himself. Judging by the account of his life and virtues left us by this good Canon, William must indeed have been an exemplary Prelate.

Assigning the motives that induced the Reverend Fathers of the Chapter to choose Vorniken from among so many, Busch tells us : ‘He was a man worthy of veneration for the holiness of his life, beloved of God and men, adorned with manifold gifts of nature and of grace, possessed of a rare intellect, advanced in years, of middle height, strong in body, beautiful and venerable in his scanty white locks, of a pleasing and peaceful countenance, circumspect in his speech, staid in his manners, a lover of regularity, a guardian of discipline, farseeing in counsel, energetic in action, absorbed in contemplation, compassionate towards the afflicted, a comforter of the tempted, strict and severe with the obdurate and perverse. Humble of the humble, modest of the [modest, wise of the wise, great-souled in adversity, grateful to God in prosperity, and in all his occupations diligent and

exemplary. He was so rigorous with himself that whatever he taught others to do, he first accomplished in his own person.*

The chronicler then proceeds to tell us of his regularity in attending the choir, and his constant industry. 'In his leisure time,' he says, 'he was never idle, but he either wrote, or studied, or gave himself to compunction.†' He took great pleasure in the feasts of the Church, especially in the solemnities of Christmas and the Epiphany. Indeed, all the Church services were an occasion of delight to him, a delight which he strove to communicate to all his brethren; for he regarded it as the end of all religious exercises 'to taste and see how sweet the Lord is.' After this we are not surprised to learn that he was remarkable for his devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament, that he spent long, happy hours before the tabernacle, and that thither he had recourse in all his perplexities. Finally, we are informed that he was most compassionate towards the sick, and that yet he discouraged long visits to the infirmary, for fear of the consequent waste of words, of which, he used to say, a religious should be as sparing as a miser of his gold; that he had a tender charity for the faithful departed; that he possessed a most profound knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; and that withal he was a most humble man, and ever regarded himself as a useless and unprofitable servant.

It is pleasant to think that for so many years our Venerable à Kempis lived under the government of so

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. xxxiii.

† *Ibid.*

holy and exemplary a Superior. Knowing, as we do, his eagerness to turn to his own spiritual profit whatever was edifying in the conduct of those around him, we may be sure that he derived much benefit from his daily contact with this saintly religious. Nor is this all. Some writers, noting that the four books of the 'Imitation' were composed while William Vorniken was Prior of Mount St. Agnes, and remarking the striking similarity which exists between the maxims of that golden little manual and the general tenor of the life and virtues of this devout Canon, have been led to the conclusion that Thomas, in much that he wrote therein, was but portraying the character of his venerable Superior.

About a year after the arrival of this good Prior at the Mount, that is, A.D. 1409, the monastery of Budiken was annexed to the Windesheim Congregation. It seems that the Canons in this establishment had gradually fallen away from their primitive discipline, and were now living as Secular clergy. William de Monte, the Prince-Bishop of Paderborn, wishing to effect their reformation, handed over the priory with all its rights and appurtenances to the Canons Regular in Zwolle. In his deed of gift he assigned as one of his reasons for this course of action that 'St. Meynulf, the founder of the said monastery, is believed to have been a professed religious of that order.*' I have mentioned this as one instance of many that occur throughout the Chronicles of Windesheim and Mount St. Agnes. Sometimes of their own accord, sometimes at the desire of some Prince or Bishop, a great number of Canonries in the Netherlands were,

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 166.

within a few years, transferred to the new Congregation.

During the following year Brother Nicholas Kreyen-shot, the first Canon professed by Prior Vorniken, fell ill and departed to his reward, at the early age of twenty-three. To each of his obituary notices in the Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes, our Venerable Thomas adds an edifying little biographical sketch of the religious who has passed away. In the present instance, among other tributes to the amiable character of this youthful Brother, à Kempis informs us: 'In him the virtue of obedience was especially resplendent, as worthily befitted a good young man. Who ever said, "Come, Brother," and he did not immediately come? or, "Go," and he did not at once depart?'

Two years later occurred an event of great interest to Thomas and his brethren, an event also which shows how much progress the Priory of Mount St. Agnes had made in the few years that had elapsed since its foundation. 'On the eighth day of April, A.D. 1412,' records à Kempis, 'our church was consecrated in honour of Christ's virgin and martyr, St. Agnes, by his lordship Matthias Buduanen, the suffragan of our Father and Master in Christ, Frederick de Blankenheim, Bishop of Utrecht. A multitude of religious and ecclesiastics assisted at the ceremony, among others the Prior of Windesheim and the Prior of Belheim, and two priests from Zwolle, Conrad Hengel and John Haerleim. Many other honourable persons of both sexes were present; young and old, townspeople and villagers, all flocked to the dedication. For it was an occasion of great

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 37.

joy to all ; and, moreover, a general permission was granted to externs to enter the cloister.

‘ Having completed the solemn consecration of the church, the Bishop, wearing his mitre, proceeded to consecrate the four altars. And in the first place he dedicated the high altar in the choir to the honour of the Most Holy Trinity, of the Blessed Mother of God, of the Virgin St. Agnes, and of the Apostles of Christ. And then immediately he sang a solemn High Mass of the dedication of the church and altar, and this was the conventual Mass for the day. Afterwards in the greater chapel outside the choir, on the north side of the church, he consecrated an altar in honour of the Holy Cross and of the Blessed Martyrs. Then in the middle of the Church, to the left of the choir, he dedicated an altar to the Blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, and to our holy Father, St. Augustine. Finally on the south side of the choir he consecrated an altar in honour of the most blessed Mary Magdalene, of St. Catherine, of St. Cecilia, and of the eleven thousand Holy Virgins. And at once on each altar Mass was celebrated, and the saving Victim reverently offered to God. In the afternoon he consecrated in the presence of the community a cemetery for the burial of the dead, outside the church, on the west and north.

‘ On the same day he granted an indulgence of forty days to all present, and also to all the benefactors of the church, and to all who should pay a visit to the altars, as he was evidently empowered to do by a letter from the Pope concerning the consecration of the church. There are also in the same church two other altars, which were consecrated when the priory was at Westerhoff, and which, with the permission of

the Bishop of Utrecht, were transferred hither after the Brethren had returned. One of these, the one that stands on the south side of the church, is dedicated to St. John the Baptist and to the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. The other is dedicated to SS. James and John, Apostles. The anniversary of the consecration of the church and of all the altars is solemnly celebrated by all the inmates of the establishment every year, in the month of October, on the first Sunday after the Feast of St. Gall, Abbot (October 16); and on this day also, to the praise and honour of the Most Holy Trinity, is observed the feast of the dedication of the house of Blessed Mary at Windesheim, and of the house of the nuns at Dieppenheim.

‘Ever since the Feast of Pentecost this year the Canonical Hours have been conventually sung in our church,’ concludes the pious chronicler, little dreaming of the ruin and devastation that were to be wrought by the so-called Reformers not much more than a century later. Thomas also notes that in this same year (1412) ‘the venerable Fathers of the Canons Regular in Brabant attended the General Chapter at Windesheim, and were received with their houses and united to our Congregation.’*

This period of our holy Canon’s life—that is to say, from his entrance into religion until his ordination—is generally regarded by his biographers as one of interior trials and aridity, or, at least, of frequent changes from the abundance of sensible consolations by which the hardships of a mortified life are sweetened for the tyro to the feeling of utter desolation by

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ pp. 38-40.

which the devout soul is chastened, taught to recognise its own weakness and its need of God's constant assistance, and is led by degrees to be willing to serve its Divine Master with a 'princely' spirit purely for His own sake, and not because of those spiritual delights which He is wont to bestow. These authorities also regard certain chapters of one of Thomas' earliest works, the 'Soliloquy of the Soul,' as a faithful narration of his own experience in the 'purgative way,' and certainly on reading this portion of his writings the conviction is more than ever borne home to us that the author has personally sounded all the depths and shoals of the mystic life, and that in his endeavour to instruct others he is revealing the secrets of his own communings with God. Here I will only give a few extracts in which the Venerable à Kempis points out the practical lessons that are to be drawn from this succession of consolation and trial, trial and consolation, by which the Spouse of holy souls is wont to lead on His elect to more intimate union with Himself. However, I would once more urge all who have the time and opportunity to study this little treatise of à Kempis in full if they wish to gain a clearer insight than they have hitherto possessed into this wondrous science of the Saints.

'Why is it, my Beloved, that Thou hast dealt thus with me?' Thomas inquires. 'Why hast Thou abandoned me? Answer me. Thou didst leave me and didst depart; but Thou hast also returned again. And in this Thou hast done well. If Thou hadst not come speedily, I would almost have fallen away. But, knowing the secrets of my soul, Thou didst have pity on me. For at Thy departure I was sad, and

now at Thy return I am consoled. Tell me, nevertheless, something for my instruction. What good didst Thou intend in this? Why art Thou pleased thus to come and go, afflicting me? Doth it delight Thee to hear, "Stay with us, Lord, because it is towards evening"?" . . .

The Beloved, in His reply to this query, after a magnificent passage, in which He recounts some of His titles to the love and veneration of the devout soul, thus proceeds to explain His conduct: "I will conceal My face from her for a little while; I will leave her for a moment; I will see whether she loves Me purely. It is much to love purely; for this is to love Me not for her own sake, not for the sake of any temporal advantage or spiritual delight, but to love Me for Myself only, to love herself for My sake as her end, and for the sake of nothing else to be hoped for from Me. It is not in the power of all thus to love Me; but this privilege of pure love belongs only to the perfect soul. For the soul that is yet imperfect must be frequently tried and exercised, that she may know how much she loves, and whether she loves Me so far as to forget herself. Thou hast said in thy heart, "Certainly I love," and the same thou dost often repeat, "I love." But I believe not mere words and thoughts, for I will prove thee in truth.

"For when I am present and caress thee, when I give or increase the gift of devotion, when I bring only prosperity and mostly consolation, then thou canst say devoutly, "My Beloved, I love Thee." And thou sayest well. For I am exceedingly lovable, and all things that can be said or thought concerning Me are lovable, sweet, and praiseworthy for ever. But

only to praise and love Me in the midst of favours—what is there great in this? Even sinners do this. For they often say that I am good when they receive that which their evil heart desires. But praise is not seemly in the mouth of a sinner. He, therefore, that loves Me for the sake of My gifts or consolations, what more does he do than would a miser? Thou shouldst advance, advance, and ascend to higher things. Be ashamed of being ever weak and soft, learn to eat solid food, and desire no longer to be nourished with the milk of children. Pass over to the number of the strong men of David, of those that hold the spear, and the sword, and the shield. Take up thy cross, and follow Me. Hasten to be classed with those who know how to bear for My sake divers calamities and many kinds of exile.

‘Thou art too fond of consolation. I wish to try thee, therefore, and to bend thee to the other side, that thou mayest test by experience what thou art able to bear, lest thou shouldst seem to thyself innocent and holy. I will send upon thee tribulation and anger and indignation and assault from the evil angels. Some will take that which is thine; others will deny thee that of which thou standest in need. Some will detract thee; others will resist thee to thy face. Some will impose a heavy burden upon thee; others will lead thee whither thou wouldst not. Some will cause thee physical suffering; others will cause thee moral pain. Others will be raised to position and honours; thou wilt be left to obscurity and toil.

‘In all these and in greater afflictions thou wilt be tried as a strong athlete. I will absent myself from thee: nor will I cease until I have thoroughly tried

thee, whether thou wilt bless Me to My face. And if thou lovest Me with thy whole heart, and at all times wilt praise Me, it is fitting that thou shouldst be called My spouse and shouldst have a secret chamber with Me. But if thou art not yet able to bear My rod, but thinkest My discipline too severe, mourning My absence many days, lovingly and diligently seeking Me, I will stretch out to thee My staff, that thou mayest rise; after this I will come and thou wilt be restored to thy first grace. For I am unwilling that thou shouldst faint away altogether, since I love the soul that loveth Me. And if thou dost not yet love perfectly, still I do not despise little ones; but I will take care that thou growest. For I have a care of thee that thou shouldst make progress; I would not therefore that thou shouldst have any doubts concerning Me.*

As I have already stated, Thomas was ordained priest the year after the Church of St. Agnes was completed and consecrated—that is, A.D. 1413, the thirty-fourth year of his age. We do not find this happy event chronicled by himself. Ordination followed as a matter of course the profession of each Canon; and so à Kempis makes no special record in his Chronicle of the various occasions on which the Bishop conferred orders on the members of his community. However, we are certain both of the fact itself and of the date of its occurrence. For at the death of our Venerable Thomas, another Canon, whose name is unknown to us, continued the Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes for some years, and naturally his first item was the record of the life of

* ‘Solil. Animæ,’ c. xvii.

the saintly religious who had just departed to his reward, and therein he informs us that Thomas died in the fifty-eighth year of his priesthood.

All the biographers of à Kempis agree in assigning the date of his ordination as the time wherein he composed that beautiful treatise on the Blessed Sacrament now commonly known as the 'Fourth Book of the Imitation.' Their authority is based chiefly on those words of the fifth chapter: 'Take heed to thyself, and see what ministry has been delivered to thee by the imposition of the hand of the Bishop. Behold, thou art made a priest, and art consecrated to celebrate; see, now, that faithfully and devoutly and in due time thou offerest the sacrifice to God, and that thou showest thyself blameless. Thou hast not lightened thy burden, but thou art now bound by a stricter bond of discipline and art obliged to greater perfection of holiness. A priest ought to be adorned with all virtues, and to show to others the example of a good life. His conversation should not be according to the common and ordinary ways of men, but it should be with the angels in heaven or with perfect men on earth.'

These are, indeed, the very words we would have expected the holy Canon to have uttered on such an occasion. They breathe his spirit; they show the tenor of his whole life and training. There is something especially edifying, and very worthy also of the disciple of Florence Radewyn, in his thus reminding himself that now, at last raised to the sublime dignity of the priesthood, he has not thereby in any way lessened his obligations to lead a regular and exemplary life. Indeed, the whole treatise testifies to his

realization of the exalted nature of the sacred office of the priest, and of the purity and sanctity required of those who have undertaken its holy duties. And from what we know of his earnestness and sincerity, we may be sure that he was the first to put in practice the lessons he therein inculcates, and to strive to live up to the lofty ideal he therein presents to all who have been called to the ministry of the altar.

In the years immediately following his ordination Thomas seems to have been engaged in the composition of the other three books of the 'Imitation.' It is, however, uncertain in what order they were written. Nor were they at first regarded as parts of one beautiful whole; but each treatise was considered as a distinct work, and usually entitled according to the heading of the opening chapter. Eusebius Amort informs us* that the first manuscript of the complete work appeared about the year 1418, and that from that date to A.D. 1440 various copies were taken, differing, however, greatly in the division and titles of chapters and books, and that these variations did not cease until after A.D. 1441, in which year Thomas published an autograph edition.

The better to understand this we must remember that the lowly-minded Canons of Windesheim took little care to affix their names to their manuscripts, and that, moreover, in those days the art of pointing had yet to be invented. The consequence was, that when by one channel and another the various ascetical works of à Kempis were carried abroad, they fell into the hands of this copyist and that, and each transcribed them without much thought of their author,

* 'Deduct. Crit.,' p. 50.

and some even bound them together with a treatise by a well-known writer, such as St. Bernard, Henry de Kalcar, or the great Parisian Chancellor, John Gerson. After a time, however, it became generally known that Thomas was the real compiler of the 'Imitation,' and thenceforth until about two hundred years after his death his claim to its authorship was never called into question.

It may be a disappointment to some readers to learn that their favourite manual of spiritual reading and devotion was completed before its author had yet attained his fortieth year. Perhaps they have pleased themselves with the fancy of the Venerable à Kempis—venerable in years and aspect as well as in sanctity—seated tranquilly in his cell, and committing to parchment for the edification of posterity the experience and heavenly wisdom acquired in the course of a long and holy life. But a little reflection will show that, though this picture has its charms, yet such persons have no reason to regret that it is not altogether true.

I would remind them of that sentence of Holy Writ: 'Venerable old age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years: but the understanding of a man is gray hairs, and a spotless life is old age' (Wisdom iv. 8, 9). Those who have perused the foregoing pages will readily acknowledge that the innocent youth of à Kempis, spent in the midst of most saintly men, whose holy maxims he devoutly treasured and whose many virtues he fully appreciated, warmly admired and sincerely strove to imitate, his long novitiate spent in the company of true religious, men utterly detached from the world, and enduring

with joyous patience every species of trial and privation, passed under the guidance of his brother John, a most exemplary man, and himself also the transcriber and composer of many devout treatises, occupied in the employment of writing slowly, carefully and reverently, word by word, line by line, page by page, the works of the early Fathers, and the most beautiful portions of the sacred Scriptures, the years that then elapsed between his profession and his ordination, years occupied with the sacred studies suitable to his calling, years that witnessed his daily progress in the virtues that befitted his holy state, humility, obedience, love of labour, poverty, devotion, years again spent under the eyes of a Superior remarkable for those same virtues, the very virtues he most loved and prized—in a word, they will acknowledge that his whole life in all its incidents and surroundings had eminently fitted him for that great work which has crowned his name with undying fame.

We are not surprised when a musician, a genius, who has devoted all his thoughts and energies from childhood, and that, too, under the tuition of most able professors, produces a masterpiece at the age, say, of thirty. Why, then, should we be astonished that a man of God, trained from his earliest days in the school of Christian perfection, the ear of his soul undisturbed by the tumult of the world, ever ready to catch the whisperings of the Holy Spirit, the harp of his heart ever attuned to the gentle touch of God—that such a one should, ere yet his brow was crowned with hoary locks, bring forth a work breathing the spirit of intense devotion that animated his own life, reflecting the character of his surroundings and

associates, and gathering into one the greatest thoughts and the best that he had met with in his constant reading of the Scriptures, the Fathers, and the pious treatises of his brother religious.

But of this work itself what shall I say? What can I say that has not been already repeated a thousand times? Leibnitz says of it that 'it is one of the most excellent treatises that have ever been composed,' and Fontenelle calls it 'the most perfect work that has come from the hand of man.' These two phrases sum up all the encomiums bestowed upon it, and all the tributes paid to its worth by Catholics and Protestants alike for the last three hundred years. It is useless, then, for me to strive to speak of it in terms of worthy praise. Equally beyond my capacity is it to attempt anything like a commentary of this wonderful little book. The best commentary I can offer is this simple record I am endeavouring to give of its author's holy life.



THOMAS À KEMPIS.

To face p. 143.

CHAPTER VIII

The General Council of Constance, and its connection with the Canons of Windesheim—Further items from the Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes—Thomas's veneration for the Cross—The death of Frederick, Bishop of Utrecht

IN the year after à Kempis' ordination to the priesthood the General Council of Constance was solemnly opened, A.D. 1414. Apart from its importance as the means of ending the great schism which had for so many years distracted the Church of God, this Council was a subject of intense and prayerful interest to Thomas and his brethren, inasmuch as their Institute was then and there being discussed before His Holiness, Pope Martin V., and the assembled Cardinals and potentates, and it was with much anxiety that they awaited the result.

It appears that one Matthew Grabo, a Dominican Friar, had written a work against the Brothers and Sisters of the Modern Devotion and their brethren, the Canons Regular of Windesheim. The latter took up their own defence and that of their lay associates, and the matter was brought before the tribunal of the Bishop of Utrecht. Finding that the case was going against him there, Grabo appealed to the Holy See, and the cause was finally carried for trial to the

Council at Constance. Thither the friar was summoned, and thither also were summoned three representatives of the disciples of Gerard Groot and Florence Radewyn, namely, John vos de Huesden, Prior of Windesheim, John Wael, Prior of the Canons Regular at Zwolle, and Henry Ahus, Rector of the Devout Clerics in the city of Münster.

The defence was opened by no less a personage than the great Chancellor of Paris, John Gerson, who addressed the assembled Prelates with such force and eloquence that Grabo was compelled to withdraw certain statements in his book as 'heretical, erroneous, scandalous and offensive to the ears of the pious.' The Canons also spoke in their own behalf. John Wael delivered a magnificent speech and John vos de Huesden explained the origin and observances of their Institute 'with his own humble and noble modesty.'

The result was most satisfactory to our Venerable à Kempis and all his brother-religious. The two Priors and their companion were treated with marked respect by all the Cardinals and Bishops, and the holy Father addressed to them words of the greatest encouragement, and afterwards in a Bull, entitled 'Sponsa Christi,' confirmed all their privileges and granted them several additional favours. The whole episode demonstrates the wisdom and foresight of Gerard the Great in placing his favourite Confraternity under the protection of a religious order; for otherwise the storm of persecution raised by Matthew Grabo and others of his class would certainly have soon brought the Institute to an untimely end.

It is of interest to note that one of the accusations brought against the Brothers of the Common Life by Friar Grabo was that they taught youth gratuitously without any permission from their ecclesiastical superiors. Martin V., however, warmly commended them for their zeal in this vast field of labour, and strongly urged them to persevere therein. On this point, Leibnitz, as quoted by Amort,* has the following remarkable passage: 'John Gerson defended them not only by word, but by a written treatise also. He showed that they were founded to keep schools and to teach their scholars not only letters, but also good morals and the virtues of a Christian life. He further showed that they lived in common without personal property, according to the institutions of the primitive Church, that they did not beg, and that they remained in humble subjection to their Bishops. This account gave such satisfaction that the Council, under the presidency of Martin V., having approved of their manner of life, encouraged them to do manfully, to erect schools and to instruct young men in piety, thereby forming them into pillars of the Church of God. And so these clerics of the Common Life revived learning throughout lower Germany. From their schools have issued many celebrated men: Desiderius Erasmus, Peter Canisius, etc. And thus their Institute is akin to that of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, who have also devoted themselves to the education of youth.'

Another remark I may allow myself on this matter is that, in all probability, the Windesheim Fathers, the better to show the spirit of their order, carried

* 'Deduct. Crit.,' p. 304.

with them the various ascetical works composed by several of their Brethren. Among these an eminent place would be held by the 'Imitation' of à Kempis. Now, their defence was commenced by John Gerson on December 20, A.D. 1417, and the decision against Grabo was pronounced on the third of the following April. Consequently, for some months the two Priors had ample opportunity of conversing with their noble-hearted advocate. If such were the case, they would naturally show him Thomas's beautiful work, and even present him with a copy. This supposition is confirmed by the fact that in his latter days, in the retirement and obscurity of exile, Gerson composed several devout treatises, some of which bear a great resemblance to the 'Imitation.'

Present at the same Council were also the superiors and representatives of more than fifty different religious Congregations. Of these, many would doubtless hear of the new masterpiece in mystic theology, and would be anxious to procure a copy for their own monasteries in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and England, respectively. Thus we can account for the rapid diffusion of a work written by a comparatively unknown religious, dwelling in a small priory in an obscure corner of a remote province.

We can well imagine the joy with which the tidings of the triumph of their order were received by Thomas and his fellow-Canons. Though neither of the Priors present at the Council dwelt at St. Agnes, yet Zwolle was quite close, and Windesheim was not far distant; and we may be sure that intelligence such as this would be speedily transmitted from one house to another. John Busch, the chronicler of the latter

priory, tells us, in words of touching simplicity, of the joyous welcome with which Vos de Huesden was received on his return.

‘The Prior of Windesheim,’ he says, ‘returning from the Council of Constance, was lovingly welcomed by all the Brethren with immense joy. In token of their gladness at his happy arrival, our whole community supped with him in the infirmary.’ This place was doubtless chosen because there the rule of silence, so strictly observed elsewhere, was relaxed, and also because thus the ailing and the convalescent would have an opportunity of hearing the good news. But to resume. ‘We then learnt of the kindness, goodwill, and favour with which he had been there received by all the Prelates of the Church. He also told us how the Emperor Sigismund, in the hearing of all, delivered a discourse in Latin on the preservation of the unity of the Church, having, however, first protested that, on account of his want of acquaintance with the Latin tongue, he should not be blamed if he committed a barbarism, or a solecism; although, in fact, he spoke his mind before the universal Church, gathered together in the Holy Spirit, with great clearness and sufficient ease. Our Father also related to us how, in the company of other devout religious, he had visited at Constance, with feelings of great reverence and joy, the cell of that holy Dominican Friar, Henry Suso, who, full of the instinct of the Holy Ghost, had composed the “Clock of Eternal Wisdom.” And many other like things he narrated to us, which it would take too long to mention here.’*

* ‘Chron.,’ Lib. I., c. xli.

The year before these good Fathers returned from Constance, à Kempis completed another great work, the transcribing of the Roman Missal. This volume he also illuminated, for its lettering is described as being diversified with red, blue, and black. On the last page may be seen the following inscription, written with red ink in his own handwriting: 'In the year of the Lord one thousand four hundred and seventeen, by the hand of Brother Thomas of Kempen.' This Missal was used at the Mount for many years after the holy Canon's death. It is another standing monument of the constant industry of him who bids us in the 'Imitation' never to be wholly idle.

It may have been due to the fact that the sanitary arrangements of the Middle Ages were not so perfect as are those of the nineteenth century, or it may have been owing to causes of which we have little cognizance to-day; but, whatever the occasion, certain it is that destructive plagues were of frequent occurrence in those days. In the lifetime of à Kempis alone the district in which he dwelt was again and again visited by a dreadful scourge, which carried off the poorer people in their thousands, and spared not even the religious, whom a regular life and cleanly habits rendered less liable to its ravages. The reader will remember that Gerard Groot succumbed to one such visitation. A similar pest swept over Deventer, Zwolle, Kampen, and the neighbourhood in the year 1421, and carried off some of Thomas's Brethren on the Mount.

'In the month of September' (so runs the Chronicle), 'while the pestilence was still fiercely raging, some of our Brethren were stricken by the disease. On the

octave of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (September 15) a certain layman from Drenthia, named Nicholas, our miller, died during High Mass. He was a man of good life and reputation, and beloved by all in the house.’*

The next victim was a priest, a native of Zwolle, named Octbert Wild. He was remarkable, Thomas informs us, for his devotion to ‘our Patroness, St. Agnes.’ ‘His body was interred, after the usual Masses and prayers, next to Brother Nicholas Kreyen-shot, on the eastern side of the cloister.’ It should be noted that our saintly chronicler usually thus indicates the burial-place of a departed Brother. His accuracy in this regard was of great service two centuries later, when a search was being made for his own holy relics.

Still a third victim was carried off within the same month of September. This was an oblate lay Brother (Donatus), Nicholas Peters, ‘our carpenter, a man of great stature and of remarkable strength, who had lived at Mount St. Agnes for more than twenty years. He came from Monekedam, in Holland, dwelt with us from the foundation of the monastery, and left a worthy monument of his industry and skill in the building of the church and in the new stalls for the Brethren in the choir.’*

This good Brother is mentioned in another of à Kempis’ works, at the end of one of his sermons to the novices. He had been treating of the duty of a religious to daily bear the cross which he had embraced on entering the cloister. On concluding his discourse, in order to prove by examples the virtue

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ pp. 43, 44.

of the Cross of Christ, he relates among others the following incident :

‘ There was with us a certain laic, named Nicholas Peters, a native of Holland. This man, although he was a prosperous carpenter, determined, by the inspiration of God, to leave the world and to enter our monastery. While, therefore, he was walking alone on the way, and as he was approaching the priory, through the wiles and the temptations of the devil, he began to be anxious and to be very much afraid, although he knew not what there was to hinder him on his holy journey, for it was still broad daylight. Standing still, therefore, and considering within himself what he should do, he began to think that, as he could see no one, perhaps the devil wished to prevent him from proceeding further towards the monastery. And so, looking about him on all sides, he perceived at a distance a small black cloud, as it were, rise from the ground, and gradually assume immense proportions, and move forward as if driven by the wind. Terrified exceedingly at this unwonted sight, and conjecturing that Satan was striving to hinder his progress and prevent him from fulfilling his purpose, he immediately raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross, arming himself with that sacred symbol. And so, casting aside his fear, and strengthened by his vivid faith, he again signed his forehead with the Cross and courageously advanced.

‘ Whereupon that diabolical apparition, unable to resist the might of the Holy Cross, and as if shunning a sharp arrow shot against it, passed away from the road, and soon, vanishing like smoke, entirely disappeared. Then, rendered exceedingly joyful, he

bravely entered our monastery, dedicated to St. Agnes, which was then being founded in great poverty, and was known to very few. Living here for many years afterwards, he fasted every Friday in honour of the Holy Cross, and even at the harvest-time he never dispensed himself from his Holy Cross fast, but with great constancy persevered in the purpose which he had so well begun.*

Six other examples follow, all breathing the same spirit of simplicity and devotion. The last of these I cannot resist the temptation of giving here in full, for I strongly suspect that the subject of it is our Venerable Thomas himself: 'There was a certain Devout Brother, who loved to exercise himself in the Passion of Our Lord in preference to all other sacred books, and who entertained a great reverence for the image of the Holy Cross. And whenever he saw a crucifix, mindful of the God crucified for him, he humbly bowed his head and made the sign of the Cross, which he wished to love and honour. Now, one night he saw in a vision an image of the Holy Cross hanging on the wall of a certain church, and representing our Saviour fearfully lacerated with wounds and blows. Regarding it with tender sorrow, he bowed his knees, and joined his hands, and suppliantly adored. And at once the image stretched out its right arm from the Cross and offered him its right hand. And while he was wondering at this great condescension, a voice said to him: "This is for the honour which you have shown Me on My Cross." From that time a still greater devotion grew up in his heart towards the image of the Cross, and

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars tertia, l., n. 13.

it became to him sweeter daily to meditate, read, and pray on the Passion of Our Lord.*

If the 'Devout Brother' here mentioned had been one of Thomas's associates at Deventer, it seems probable that he would have given his name, as he does in the case of Nicholas Peters and of several others. And not only does he conceal the name of the individual thus favoured, he does not even name the church in which the vision was vouchsafed. Hence we may well conclude that he whose personality is thus studiously concealed is none other than Thomas himself, especially when we remember his well-known devotion to the Passion, a devotion which finds such vivid expression in the 'Imitation,' and which, in this place, causes him to burst forth into a beautiful prayer, of which I can allow myself to give only the opening verses :

'O most delightful and most lovable Cross of my Lord Jesus Christ, outwardly exceedingly sad and bitter, but inwardly full of divine sweetness! O tree beautiful and bright, adorned with the members of Christ, as with precious gems! O fruitful vine, pierced with rugged nails! O glorious olive-tree, reddened with the blood of Christ, hallowed by the water from His side! O tree of life, bearing the King of Glory for the healing of the world! O Cross, impregnable shield, incomparable standard of our King, admirable symbol of salvation, bearing as a motto the words: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews!" Hail, Jesus of Nazareth, praise of the angels, life of the blessed, pardon of sinners, redemption of all the nations . . . !'†

* 'Serm. ad. Novit.,' Pars tertia, l. 1, n. 19. † *Ibid.*, Oratio.

I am afraid I have been rather diffuse in my digression on the Cross. My plea must be that it is a subject on which our Venerable Thomas himself delighted to be diffuse. To return now to the story of the sad losses caused by the plague. Two more victims were claimed before its quota was complete. They were both of the class to which the Chronicle gives the name 'Donati,' that is to say, men who freely served God by the labour of their hands in the monastery and observed in nearly every respect the regular life of the Brethren, and yet were bound by no vow.

The first was a native of Cologne, who had been twenty-five years at the Mount, and during that time had never visited his friends and had never seen his native land. This remark would not have been made had the subject of it been a professed religious; but as he had taken no vows, it would have been easier for him to obtain an occasional holiday, and his self-denial in this matter is recorded to his praise. 'He loved the Blessed Virgin with a singular devotion, and on Saturdays he abstained from one dish in her honour. In three particulars he was heard by the Lord before his death. For he wished to die in the bright daylight, to be assisted by all the Brethren, whom he loved exceedingly, and to have but a short agony. All which, by the providence of our loving Lord, came to pass even as he desired in his pious simplicity.'*

This good laic died on the last day of September. He was followed by another, Adam of Herderwick, on October 18. Adam had been at the Mount for twenty years, and had proved himself most willing

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 44.

and useful in various branches of manual labour. He had shown himself especially kind to the poor, and compassionate towards the sick.

‘After he had been buried,’ Thomas writes, ‘the pestilence by the mercy of God ceased. For some of the Brethren afflicted with this plague recovered from the malady.’* And we can fully sympathize with the joy and gratitude that swelled in the hearts of the community at Agnetenberg when at last they were freed from this dread visitation. They were all most holy men, and each of them was most willing to die, yet it must have been a sad spectacle to behold their ranks thus decimated, without knowing for a moment who would be the next victim, or who would be the last. Indeed, they could call to mind instances in which whole communities had been destroyed by a similar visitation. Many, then, must have been the fervent prayers which they sent up to Heaven during this time of trial. And St. Agnes, too, their holy patroness, of whose loving protection Thomas relates so many pleasing anecdotes, must have been daily besieged with petitions to plead on their behalf. At last their cry of distress was heard. The fell pest passed away, and the Brethren continued with renewed thankfulness and fervour their customary labours and devotions.

In the chapter from which I have taken the above incidents, we also find an item to the effect that : ‘In the same year (1421), after the Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24), a crusade was preached against the heretics of Prague, who, enkindling a fierce persecution against Holy Church and against the Christian

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ pp. 43-45.

clergy and people, seduced many of the faithful by threats and fallacies, overthrew monasteries and churches, and put great numbers to a most cruel death.*

Protestant writers often express the greatest admiration for these fanatics and the most sincere sympathy with their cause, and it is but natural that they should. But when these same authors would strive to persuade us that Thomas à Kempis and his Brethren were the forerunners of Luther and Company, we might call their attention to the above and similar passages in the works of these holy religious. These attest what were their real sentiments with regard to the 'Reformers' of their own days, the true precursors of the sixteenth-century Vandals.

This, however, apart, these few words of à Kempis show us that the storms which were agitating Europe made themselves felt even in his quiet retreat. We can well imagine how the pious Brethren on the Mount would shudder with horror when they heard of the terrible battles that were being waged between the soldiers of the empire and the half-savage hordes of the fanatical Bohemians. Such 'wars and rumours of war' would make them prize the more dearly the peacefulness of their cloistral home. Not, indeed, that they had to look far abroad to witness and realize all the horrors that follow in the wake of hostile armies. In the Middle Ages it required but little provocation to arm one city, or petty principality, against another, and then the belligerents would lay waste the country with fire and sword, the peaceable inhabitants would be the principal sufferers, and, in

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 43.

the heat of the combat, the sanctity of the cloister would by no means be always respected.

Thus it is with evident satisfaction that our pious Chronicler records, under the date A.D. 1422, that 'just after Pentecost a peace was concluded between the peoples of Utrecht, Holland and Gelderland, who for more than a year had waged fierce war upon one another, which had been the evil occasion of much plunder, fire and slaughter.'*

In the same year the community of St. Agnes were deprived by death of one who had evidently been a great benefactress to them, a pious widow of Zwolle, named Mary de Haerst. Thomas informs us that she 'made a good will in favour of the Brethren on the Mount,' and that her body was interred in their church. And indeed the priory, founded, as we have seen, without endowment and at the cost of great sufferings and privations, was sorely in need of such bequests. However, the necessary works and buildings were gradually being added, and we learn from the Chronicle that in the following year, 1423, the outer wall, encircling the monastery, was completed.

In the next chapter Thomas tells us of the death of Frederick de Blankenheim, the Venerable Bishop of Utrecht. This was a serious loss to the Canons Regular of Windesheim, for, as we have seen, De Blankenheim had always been most willing to afford the young Congregation his powerful favour and protection. It was also a serious loss to the whole diocese. 'After my death,' he had said, 'they will know that they had a good master.' His words proved

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 46.

only too true. In these days, when we see the Church stripped of her temporal possessions, it is difficult for us to realize the immense power wielded by a Prince-Bishop of the Middle Ages. The diocese of such a Prelate was in itself a small kingdom. It often consisted of several provinces, so extensive that the chief pastor would be obliged to employ the assistance of suffragans, and the whole of this vast territory owned the Prince-Bishop as its feudal lord. Thus Utrecht itself was so large a diocese that in later times, A.D. 1559, with the three other bishoprics of Arras, Cambrai and Tournay, it was divided into fourteen new sees. It is evident at a glance that it required a man of great force of character and of singular integrity of purpose, to fill worthily so exalted and responsible a post.

And such a one seems to have been the noble Frederick de Blankenheim, who for thirty years ruled the see of Utrecht. Thomas waxes eloquent in his praise, and calls him 'the pillar of the priesthood, the star of the clergy, the father of religious, the friend of all the devout, the protector of orphans, the avenger of injustice. . . . In his days the condition of the country of Utrecht was the best that could be desired. Prelates were conspicuous for their worthiness, priests for their piety in Divine worship, religious for their devotion, maidens for their chastity, the people for their fervent faith, judges for their rigour, cities for their prosperity. Then also flourished literary pursuits, especially at Deventer and Zwolle; thither from different cities and provinces, far and near, an immense crowd of scholars flocked. And because he feared God and honoured Holy Church, and loved and

protected all who served God, therefore the King of Heaven defended him from the enemies that surrounded him; subjecting to him rebellious nations, and in particular the Frisians, who invaded his territories. He also made his days glorious with wondrous events; so that a golden age seemed to be vouchsafed to the country of Utrecht.*

But, as the holy Bishop had foreseen, all was sadly changed after his death. More of this, however, in its proper place.

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' pp. 48, 49.

CHAPTER IX

The death of John de Huesden, Prior of Windesheim, and Thomas's supernatural premonition of the same—The transference of William Vorniken from Mount St. Agnes to Windesheim, and the election of his successor, Theodoric Clive—Thomas is elected Sub-prior—Exile of the Canons of St. Agnes



THE time has now arrived to speak of the occasion on which we first find mention of our Venerable à Kempis as the author of the 'Imitation.' It is an occasion also on which we receive another striking proof of the eminent sanctity of Thomas and his brother-religious, and of the frequency with which heavenly favours were conferred on them.

The nineteenth chapter of the Chronicles of St. Agnes contains a record of the character and death of the Venerable Prior, John vos de Huesden, with whom the reader is already acquainted as the representative of Windesheim at the Council of Constance. He had been a disciple of Gerard Groot and Florence Radewyn, and had been clothed as a Canon Regular a year after the founding of the new Congregation. In a very short time he was elected Prior of Windesheim at the comparatively early age of twenty-eight.

Thereby he was also constituted Superior-General of the Congregation of Canons Regular, and of all the Devout Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. And this important post he filled for thirty-three years, in a manner that won for him the love and esteem of all his subjects, so much so indeed that he was afterwards regarded as a father and founder of the Institute, and his name was honoured with a reverence equal to that in which they held the names of Gerard Groot and Florence Radewyn. Thomas à Kempis and John Busch speak most highly in his praise, and the latter enumerates his virtues, by showing us how he lived up to the high standard of Christian perfection as inculcated in the eight beatitudes.

Now, it happened that a few weeks before this holy priest's death à Kempis was visiting Windesheim on some business connected with the Mount, and while there he received a supernatural warning of their coming loss. 'For he saw in the heavens the spirits gather together and hasten, as it were, to be present at someone's demise. And immediately in his sleep he heard the rattle sounding as if for the departure of a dying Brother (it was thus the Community was warned when one of the number was at the point of death); so that, aroused thereby, he awoke. Rising, therefore, from his bed with the intent of going to see what was the matter, he could perceive no one; for it was not yet five o'clock, and the Brethren were still sleeping. Returning to himself, he began to think in silence: "Perhaps our Father the Prior is about to migrate from this world." However, he related nothing of the vision to anyone in the house; but to a cleric from Brabant, who was accompanying him on

his way home, he said in confidence: "You might tell Master Herman Scutken, who is staying at Thenis, that if he wishes to speak to our Father at Windesheim he must come quickly; for I think he will not live long, if the vision a certain person had last night be true.'*

Such is the version of à Kempis himself, who relates the incident as occurring to a third person, one of two Brothers from Agnetenberg. His contemporary, Busch, records the same event in almost the same terms, but with this important addition, that he informs us who was the actual recipient of the warning. 'It happened a few days before his death,' he writes, 'that two notable Brothers of Mount St. Agnes, a monastery of our order near Zwolle, came to Windesheim to consult our Prior on certain matters. One of these, Brother Thomas de Kempis, a man of blameless life, who has composed many devout books, namely, "He who follows Me," "Of the Imitation of Christ," and others, beheld in a dream the following night a presage of what was coming to pass.'†

On the fifteenth day after this vision had been granted to Thomas the holy Prior died. It was on the Saturday after the Feast of St. Andrew. The Canons were singing a votive Mass of our Lady, and were just in the midst of the *Gloria in excelsis*, when the sad tidings were brought to them. 'And for his happy passage to his heavenly home a Collect was immediately added in the same Mass; and when that Mass was finished, a Requiem Mass was at once

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 51.

† 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxi.

commenced.* After High Mass on the following day his body was reverently laid before the steps of the sanctuary.

Shortly afterwards the community of Windesheim were consoled for their loss by a vision vouchsafed to one of the senior priests, who beheld in an ecstasy our holy Father St. Augustine, accompanied on the one hand by Gerard Groot, followed by an immense concourse of departed 'priests, brothers, and sisters of the Devout Congregations,' and on the other by John vos de Huesden with a numerous train of 'Fathers, Brothers, and nuns of our order and Chapter.'†

Among other praiseworthy characteristics of De Huesden, I must not omit to mention his zeal for the work of collecting and transcribing manuscripts, especially the works of the Fathers and the Holy Scriptures. It was during his days that the Canons of Windesheim were engaged on their great task of collecting, collating, and correcting various editions of the Bible, in order to procure a copy that would be as authentic and as reliable as possible. John Busch tells us of their unremitting labours in this pursuit. At last they issued an edition of the Scriptures, corrected according to an antique facsimile of the translation by St. Jerome.

This edition, bearing the approval of the General Chapter, of the Ordinary, and of the Holy Father, was the pattern according to which all the Bibles of all the houses of the new Congregation were to be transcribed; and it was from this model that à Kempis copied his own beautiful Bible, an immense work in

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxi.

† *Ibid.*

four volumes, another monument of his patience, industry, and skill.

By Vos de Huesden's death, then, the whole body of the Modern Devotion lost a most zealous and enlightened Superior and Director. Moreover, the community at Mount St. Agnes were especially affected by it, inasmuch as it deprived them of their own valued and beloved Prior, William Vorniken. For as soon as possible after the obsequies of Father John the Canons of Windesheim elected as his successor their Procurator, Gerard Naeldwuc, and their choice was afterwards confirmed by the General Chapter and by the Apostolic See. But the honour and the burden proved too much for this humble servant of God. After he had been in office about three months, he called some of the Priors to Windesheim and besought them to accept his resignation. Moved by his entreaties and by his evident distress, these Fathers consented, but left the election of another Superior-General to the General Chapter, which soon after assembled.

It was then that Prior Vorniken was unanimously chosen by all the Fathers of the Congregation. He, too, would willingly have excused himself, and did, indeed, strive his utmost to escape the dignity; nevertheless, he was constrained by their authority to submit. Moreover, lest the resignation of Father Gerard should ever be used as a precedent, 'our Venerable General Chapter did not let it pass without censure, but enjoined on him as a penance that he should take his dinner seated on the bare floor in the refectory at the feet of all the Fathers and Brothers of our order then present. Which penance that holy

man most willingly accepted and performed; and afterwards he assured one of his intimate friends that he was much more happy and contented sitting there on the ground than if he had presided over all the Fathers of the General Chapter as the Superior of them all. For humility, the virtue of Christ, had become so natural to him that he esteemed humiliation honour, and contempt of himself glory. Blessed be God in all things,' exclaims the pious John Busch, from whom we have this edifying incident, 'Who permitted our monastery to behold and possess such Fathers who were pillars of virtue, examples of holiness, and patterns of discipline to the Church of God, to our order, and our Congregation.'*

Prior Vorniken, then, was transferred to Windesheim, 'and all in that house,' says à Kempis, 'give thanks to God and rejoice; but Agnetenberg, deprived of her faithful pastor, was saddened, and wept not a little, for the like of him she knew not.' And now it became necessary to proceed to the election of another Superior. 'The Brethren, therefore, having come together, and the community having sung the Mass of the Holy Ghost on the Saturday after Pentecost, all the capitular Canons assembled in the chapter-house. And so, the votes of all having been taken, Brother Theodoric Clive, our Sub-prior, was elected. At this election were present the Venerable Fathers, the Prior of Windesheim, and the Prior of the House of our Lady near Northorn, and they, by the authority entrusted to them, confirmed the aforesaid election as having been duly performed. This Brother Theodoric was one of the seniors of the same house, and one of

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxix.

the Brethren first clothed therein, and he had long been trained in holy discipline: he composed a book of homilies for summer and winter, and certain other works.*

All this took place in the year 1425. The sub-priorate was now vacant, and as we find our Thomas holding that post four years later, it is but reasonable to suppose that he was elected to the post at this time, although we find no mention of it in the Chronicles. The Sub-prior was to be, in all things, as his name implies, the Prior's right-hand man—his counsellor and his vicar. However, as Thomas' first term of office was of but short duration, a more detailed account of his duties is reserved until his second election, which took place some years later.

Meanwhile, however, it may be remarked that among the Windesheimers the Sub-prior was usually also the master of novices. According to the statutes the mastership of the novitiate did not constitute a distinct office, nor was it of necessity attached to the sub-priorate. We read merely: 'Let the novice be entrusted to one of the Brothers of good repute, and he shall diligently instruct him,' etc.† This Brother of good repute, however—as we gather from various passages in the Chronicles of Windesheim—was generally the Sub-prior of the house. With regard to our Venerable à Kempis, it seems certain that he had charge of the novices for many years, and, indeed, a good third of all his works was written especially for their instruction and edification.

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 53.

† 'Vetus Disciplina,' p. 575.

When speaking of the election of Theodoric Clive, Thomas had remarked : ‘ Under this man, now chosen the Father and third Prior of our house, many misfortunes happened in the diocese of Utrecht, which greatly afflicted our monastery and all the religious in the country, on account of the schism between Lord Sweder of Culenborgh, the Bishop whose appointment had been confirmed, and the nobleman Rudolph of Diepholt, and their long-continuing enmity caused much disturbance among the clergy and citizens.’* The troubles to which à Kempis here referred, and which I have already mentioned as consequent on the death of the noble-hearted Frederick de Blankenheim, were soon to fall upon the community of Agnetenberg.

It appears that soon after the death of Bishop Frederick, A.D. 1423, the four churches of Utrecht that had a voice in the choice of his successor—namely, St. Martin’s, St. Saviour’s, St. Mary’s, and St. Peter’s—elected a nobleman named Rudolph of Diepholt. It was represented, however, to Pope Martin V. that this man was altogether illiterate and almost an idiot ; and, in consequence of this information, he refused to confirm the election, and appointed the Bishop of Spire to the vacant see. This Bishop, then, *via permutationis*, handed over his right, which, doubtless, he saw would be disputed—to Sweder of Culenborgh, the Dean of the Cathedral, and this exchange was ratified by the holy Father. But the towns of Overysse, Deventer, Zwolle, and Kampen, together with a great number of the people and military of the neighbourhood, still clung to their favourite

* ‘ Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 53.

candidate, Rudolph, and refused to acknowledge Sweder. Then Martin V., and after him Eugenius IV., excommunicated Rudolf and all his party, and laid the whole diocese under a most stringent interdict.

Now, an interdict is one of the most terrible weapons in the spiritual armoury of the Church. It first came into more general use about the eleventh century. From that period, on account of some public scandal or crime, a whole province or kingdom would occasionally be subjected to this ban, usually in order that the offending prince or potentate, assailed by the complaints of his people, might be brought to a sense of his duty. The first instance we have of its declaration and execution occurred in the year 1031, when the county of Limoges was laid under an interdict because its knights had broken the peace of God.

The whole time this censure was in force, with the exception of the feasts of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, the Assumption of Our Lady, and Corpus Christi with its Octave, all public services were prohibited; the Divine offices were performed with closed doors; the administration of Holy Communion, Holy Orders, and Extreme Unction was forbidden. Baptism, however, Confirmation, Holy Viaticum and Matrimony—but this last without any blessing—were permitted. Finally, only ecclesiastics, pilgrims, and infants were entitled to Christian burial.

After a time, however, the salutary effect of this terrible punishment was greatly weakened by the frequency with which it was imposed by Bishops for altogether inadequate reasons. On these occasions

the guilty parties would be the last to submit, and if any observed the restrictions, they would be the very persons who had committed no offence.

In the present case Rudolph and his party, esteeming themselves in the right, and trusting that the Pope would remit his sentence when he had been better informed, in the meanwhile refused to abide by his decision. The consequence was that only the religious of the diocese and the more God-fearing among the people, notably the Devout Brothers and Sisters, consented to observe the interdict. Foremost in their loyalty to the Holy See stood the Canons Regular of Windesheim. Yet it must have been a sore trial to put aside all that splendour with which they loved to celebrate the Divine worship.

‘Ah, merciful God!’ exclaims à Kempis, ‘on the vigil of St. Lambert (September 16), we suspended our chant on account of the interdict which had been notified to us.’ And, as if that was not enough, their very submission to their lawful Superior brought down upon them the anger and enmity of those who had determined to resist. ‘Therefore,’ adds Thomas in the same place, ‘the princes of the earth and many of the people were filled with indignation against us and other religious; and we suffered many outrages, and we were finally compelled to go forth from our country and our monasteries because of our observance of the interdict.’*

It was an anxious time for the Communities of Windesheim, Mount St. Agnes, and Zwolle, which were in the very midst of the disaffected portion of

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 54.

the diocese. Yet, from the very beginning one course of conduct they were determined to pursue at any cost—they would never waver in their obedience to the Holy See. And when the alternative was given them to resume their public services in defiance of the Papal rescript or quit their country and their cloistral homes, perhaps never to return, to a man they chose ‘to yield to the powers of the world enraged against them, and to suffer exile for justice’ sake, rather than consent to their demands, to the scandal of all the Devout, who had already in great numbers abandoned their homes and their native towns.’*

‘And so,’ says Busch, ‘certain Canons of Utrecht came in company with the sheriffs, magistrates, and other officers of the aforesaid towns, and, entering each of our monasteries in turn, they read to the Brethren gathered together in choir an edict, to the effect that they should either immediately take up the chant and other Church services which they had ceased to perform or exile themselves from their fatherland and their monasteries. Then the decision of all, both Canons and lay Brothers and laics, dwelling in the aforesaid priories was unanimously this, that they would go into exile and submit to be sent forth, thereby saving their obedience to the Apostolic See, rather than sing against the dictates of their conscience for the sake of preserving their temporal goods. And when they were thereupon compelled to depart, some going forth with a good will, others taken and dragged from the choir and the church by force, they journeyed beyond the domain of the diocese of Utrecht, leaving in each house a few sick

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 57.

Brethren and some laics to attend to them and to their monasteries.’*

So far John Busch, whose chronicle on this point is more ample than that of à Kempis; for, being a member of the mother-house, he would naturally be better informed of the doings of the dependent priories than one who himself dwelt in one of these minor monasteries. But let us now permit Thomas to tell the story of the exile of his own Community.

‘This public expulsion and departure,’ he says, ‘took place before sunset on the very Feast of St. Barnabas the Apostle (June 11). The Brethren of Windesheim, with their household, set out towards Northorn; the Brethren of Bethlehem, in Zwolle, migrated across the Yssel into Gelderland; and the Brethren of Mount St. Agnes remained that night in Hasselt, and sailed next day towards Friesland to their Brothers in Lunenkerc, to the profit and consolation of that house, which they had commenced to reform. And, by the help of God, the monastery was soon brought to a good condition through the instrumentality of many of our Brethren who tarried there. And in the vessel we hired there were together, Brothers and clerics and laics, about twenty-four. And they remained in that place about three years for the Name of Christ and for the Church of God, patiently enduring, not without great fruit, their banishment from their fatherland.’†

Thomas then gives us a list of the exiles from the Mount. The little band comprised fifteen Brethren,

* ‘Chron. Wind.,’ Lib. I., c. xxxiv.

† ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 58.

or Canons, one novice, two lay Brothers, three postulants, two donati, and one gentleman, a guest at the priory. It is here that we learn that à Kempis held the office of Sub-prior at the time. 'These are the names,' he says, 'of our Brethren and others of our household, clerics and laics attached to our monastery, who were driven forth from their native land, Utrecht, and from the priory, because of their obedience in observing for more than a year the interdict, according to the mandate of the Apostolic See. In the first place, our venerable Father Prior, the above-mentioned Brother Theodoric Clive; second, Brother Thomas Kempis, Sub-prior; third, Brother John Ummen, an old man and infirm . . .' and so on through the whole company.

'All these,' he proceeds, 'received hospitality the first night at the convent of the Sisters in Hasselt, who showed us great kindness and compassion. And they grieved and wept much because we had been violently expelled. And as all the Brethren could not be provided with suitable places to sleep in beds, the Sisters, taking pity on us, brought us their own pallets and prepared sleeping accommodation in their stable on the hay and straw, and with such success, that we rested there in comfort. Many of the citizens of Hasselt wept out of sympathy with us. Some also being angry and thinking ill of us, derided and calumniated our Brethren; but the greater number of these were afterwards sorry for their conduct. Early the next day we chartered a small vessel, and, having taken in sufficient provisions, with oars and sails set out over the sea, not without danger, for the wind was against us, towards our destination, Fries-

land, for the Name of Christ and out of obedience to the holy Roman Church, to which we all unanimously desired to submit. We committed ourselves to God, Who wrought His mercy with us, and delivered us from the perils of the deep, and led us safely to our Brothers at Lunenkerk.*

There is no home, perhaps, more beloved than a cloistral home. Religious, having broken all other ties that bound them to the world, and leading a life of retirement, study and prayer, gradually allow one little cord to twine around their heart and fasten it to the earth. It is the love that grows upon them for the house, the grounds, the very walls, wherein they have spent so many peaceful, happy years. The regular routine of daily duty so fervently embraced in the novitiate, so constantly observed in maturity, becomes, as the years roll on, a part of their very selves. That daily round is intimately connected with this portion, or that, of their monastic home; for day after day, year after year, they are accustomed to repeat the same actions in the same locality. Thus the choir, the refectory, the cloister, every corner of the place, and above all their cell, become associated in their mind with many happy and hallowed memories. Life outside those walls becomes to them something distant, vague and dreamlike, and that they themselves could ever live contentedly elsewhere they never for a moment imagine.

Hence we can conceive what a wrench it must be if at any time some violent storm sweeps them from their tranquil shelter. Many a heartrending scene must have been witnessed in the days of the brutal

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 58.

Tudor, when the monks and nuns were despoiled wholesale, and cast adrift upon the world.

That which all religious in England suffered at the hands of Henry's minions à Kempis and his companions were enduring now, though in a lesser degree, from the anger of their own countrymen, and for precisely the same reason, fidelity to the Holy See. There is something very pathetic in the simple words in which Thomas describes their expulsion, the perils they met on the way, and the good fruit they derived from the cruel trial, both for themselves and for the monastery that afforded them shelter. We feel we would have liked more details of these three years of exile, and of Thomas's own thoughts and aspirations during this time; but it was not the aim of our pious chronicler to write a diary for the interest or edification of posterity, but only just to jot down the principal events that concerned his own community. However, even from the little we possess, we can gather much that throws great light upon the daily life of himself and his associates.

Thus, under the date of the year 1430, he records the death of John Ummen, whose name, as we have seen, was given third on the list of exiles as that of an infirm old man. This aged priest was a relation, and one of the first companions, of that other John Ummen, Gerard Groot's blind disciple, who was justly regarded as the founder of the Priory of Mount St. Agnes. He had been ailing at the time of the expulsion, but, unwilling to be deprived of the society of his brother-religious, had set out on the journey for which his weakened condition rendered him so unfit. However, at Lunenkerc his ailments increased, and it

was deemed advisable to send him back to Agnetenberg. In the priory, then, of which he had been one of the earliest professed members, and in which he had spent thirty-one happy years of religious life, the aged Canon breathed his last. But it must have been an additional trial to all the Community at this sorrowful time that the holy old man died almost alone. For a tender bond of affection united these Brethren, the more tender because hallowed by their common love of their Divine Master; and we constantly meet with instances of their earnest desire to be surrounded by all the Brethren at the moment of death, or, in the case of those who died away from the Mount, that their bones should be carried back and laid to rest with the beloved companions of their cloistral home.

This sad exile was still more saddened by yet another death, that of a young Canon only two years professed, and Thomas notes that his remains were interred in the cloister at Lunenkerc.

Meanwhile, however, strenuous efforts had been made to restore a good understanding between the Holy See and the provinces of Utrecht. Eugenius IV. sent as his Legate the Bishop of Mascon; several Prelates and religious hastened to meet him at Vianen; the interdict was removed; Rudolph was allowed to take peaceful possession of the See to which the churches of Utrecht had elected him; and the exiled religious were recalled to their homes, from which they had been banished for over three years.

‘Then,’ says Busch, ‘the Priors with their Communities returned to their own monasteries, bearing back with them sheaves of peace for the long exile

wherein they had remained banished from the diocese, and praising God in all His blessings, who striketh and healeth, woundeth and maketh whole, rejoicing in the Lord, and giving thanks that they had been permitted to suffer banishment for His Name, and that now they were returning before the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary.*

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. xxxiv.

CHAPTER X

Life, character and death of John à Kempis—The longings of Thomas for more intimate union with God—His love of the Divine Office

HOMAS himself was not in the joyous company that sailed from Friesland back to the beloved Mount. He had been summoned from Lunenkerck some twelve months previously to assist his brother John, at that time the Rector and Chaplain of the Canonesses at Bethania, near Arnheim.

The elder à Kempis had never been very strong. He was now advanced in years, and was worn out by his unremitting labours. His health was evidently failing, and the reverend Father visitors considerably called his brother Thomas to his side. A year and two months the saintly brothers lived together. It must have been a happy time for both. John had left home while Thomas was still an infant. The next time he saw him was when Thomas, a lad of thirteen summers, came to Windesheim to consult him as to his future career. More than seven years then sped by before the brothers met again, and meanwhile but little communication passed between them. Then for eight years they dwelt together under the same roof at Mount St. Agnes. But, apart

from the disparity in their respective ages, John was the Prior and Thomas only one of the junior religious, and consequently there was but little opportunity for familiar intercourse between them.

Since then, while the younger à Kempis remained in the quiet seclusion of Mount St. Agnes, his brother had been appointed Superior of no less than four houses in succession. He had founded the Priory of St. Peter's Pool, near Bommel. For some years he had directed the Sisters at Bronopia, in the suburbs of Kampen. He had then been chosen Prior by the Canons of the Visitation Priory near Haarlem, in Holland; and finally, he had been sent as Chaplain to the new foundation of Canonesses at Bethania. And now, while John was nearing the term of his long and active career, and Thomas was in the ripe maturity of a vigorous and thoughtful manhood, the two were once more brought together and given an opportunity of intimate interchange of thought and sentiment such as they had never enjoyed before.

Thomas would relieve his brother of the more onerous duties of the day; and then in their leisure time the two would converse of the interests most dear to them—the progress of the new Congregation, the reformation of the religious houses in the Netherlands, the revival of Christian piety and morality in the great mass of the people, and above all, on the love of God, the happiness of abandoning all to serve Him, and the glorious rewards which He had laid up for those that persevere unto the end. For, despite the different circumstances that had shaped the course of their lives, these brothers were in very truth twin souls. The same spirit animated them both. When

we read Busch's panegyric of John à Kempis, we almost imagine it is the character of Thomas that we see portrayed.

Though his position as Prior of new and struggling foundations compelled John to devote most of his time and thoughts to the more material aspect of the monastic life, and though, as we have seen, he was constantly engaged, in spite of his slight frame and delicate constitution, in the manual labour of erecting the necessary buildings, wielding trowel or shovel with the most energetic, nevertheless, the work which he loved was the more tranquil occupation of the scribe. His leisure time he passed in the composition of devout treatises, and also in transcribing, illuminating and correcting the books most frequently used by the Canons of Windesheim.

'He received a special gift from God,' says John Busch, 'in the work of correcting and writing books, and of bringing into agreement the different readings of various editions, and of reducing them all to their original form. Hence he became the authentic corrector of the books of our Church and Chapter, the Missals, Graduals, Antiphonaries, Lectionaries, Capitularies, Martyrologies, Ordinaries and Calendars, he being placed at the head of all those deputed to this work; and after Brother Arnold Kalker, our Subprior, he most successfully edited and compiled our constitutions.'*

In his own treatises and discourses, and in the works he transcribed for his own devotion, or for the instruction of others, John à Kempis showed a predilection for the writings of St. Bernard—a predilection,

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxxv.

indeed, that was common to nearly all the early Fathers of the Windesheim Congregation. Gerard Groot, their founder, had always shown a special devotion to the great Abbot of Clairvaux, and had recommended his works, together with those of St. Augustine, to the study of his disciples. After him we find Florence Radewyn freely quoting from the same holy author. Their immediate disciple, the saintly Prior of Windesheim, John vos de Huesden, collected various extracts from St. Bernard's books. And then the elder à Kempis continued the work, and put together those extracts that appealed more especially to him. Finally, our own Venerable Thomas also transcribed some of the lesser works of the same Saint; and a comparison of his writings, especially the 'Imitation,' with the treatises of the great Cistercian will reveal a striking similarity of thought and expression.

Perhaps it was their common love and study of this ascetic doctor that contributed more than anything else to render the two brothers à Kempis so alike in character. As I have already observed, the virtues for which John was remarkable are precisely those that shone most resplendently in Thomas. Speaking of the former, Busch informs us: 'He was a man of simple mien and of composed demeanour, humble of heart, of a modest disposition, of a strong intellect, prudent in counsel, pure in thought, in himself recollected, towards God devout and loving, to his Brethren amiable and sweetly grave. He was never froward or clamorous, but ever quiet and earnest, a sincere lover of discipline and of his cell, never idle, but ever engaged in some useful occupation.'*

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxxv.

Even his discourses to his younger Brethren were such as we might easily imagine uttered by the author of the 'Imitation' himself. Here is a fragment of one of these spiritual conferences, preserved for us by the care and industry of the invaluable John Busch : 'We wish to be humble without suffering contempt, patient without enduring tribulation, obedient without restraint, poor without want, virtuous without labour, penitent without sorrow. We desire to be praised without virtue, to be loved without goodness, to be honoured without sanctity. But Christ, our Lord, did not act and teach thus ; for He promised the kingdom of heaven to those that do violence to themselves, and He will reward with honour and glory only those that suffer injury, and no evil will He leave unavenged.'*

It must, then, have been a source of great consolation, and an occasion, too, of much spiritual profit to both, that Thomas was allowed to be by his brother's side when the days of the latter were drawing to their close. And Thomas remained by him until the very end. 'I was present,' he tells us with evident satisfaction, 'and I closed his eyes.' These words occur in the twenty-fourth chapter of the 'Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes,' in which he records briefly and simply his brother's departure from this world. 'In the same year' (A.D. 1432), he begins, 'on the fourth of November, at the twelfth hour after mid-day, died Brother John Kempis, the first Superior and Confessor of the nuns in Bethania, near Arnheim, in the sixty-seventh year of his age.' He then gives a short sketch of his laborious career, and concludes thus :

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. II., c. xxxv.

‘At length, in Bethania, the house of obedience, he happily finished his life in obedience and in a good old age. He was buried there within the cloister after Vespers.’*

The peaceful and happy death of his brother must have added fresh fuel to the ever-burning desire which consumed Thomas’s heart to shake off the shackles of the flesh and fly to that heavenly home to which his thoughts were habitually turned, on which all his hopes were fixed. But doubtless, also, he recognised that his hour was not yet come. He restrained his eagerness, therefore, and resolved anew that, as he was not yet permitted to leave the world, he would live as one not of the world; and as he was not yet permitted to be free from the flesh, he prayed anew that his spirit might be as little oppressed by its burden as possible. These and the like thoughts and aspirations found expression in the following outburst of his fervent and loving soul :

‘I pray Thee, my God, and I implore Thee, free me, and deliver my captive and distracted soul from all the concupiscences of the world and all the imaginations of the flesh, that in myself by an enlightened reason I may find Thee, Who hast made me in Thy precious and incorruptible likeness. . . . Elevate my mind above all earthly things and purify the affections of my heart. Renew me according to the interior man, and by the sevenfold grace of the Holy Ghost refashion that image, which Thou hast created immortal, invisible, and incorporeal, capable of all virtues, able to comprehend eternal truth, able to understand itself, to use reason, raised above the

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 62.

brute creation, more excellent than all things sensible and visible, formed even after Thine own image and likeness.

‘Drive from me and expel from me everything that can stain or tarnish Thine image, lest it become unworthy of Thy regard, and offend the eyes of Thy Majesty. Deign to fill with love, to enlighten with understanding, and unceasingly to visit this, Thy precious and most noble image, which Thou beholdest without any medium, and which Thou preservest in existence. Remember for what high end Thou didst first create it, out of nothing, but not for nothing, and with what great and holy price Thou didst again liberate it from the chains of sin. Permit not that a creature of such excellence should be made subject to sins of the flesh, but defend it from all evil, and enrich it with Thy grace. And may that which is wanting to it by reason of the taint of corrupted nature be supplied by the addition of the gifts of Thy grace. . . .

‘It is needful that the heart be free and pure from all inordinate affection, it is needful that the mind be undisturbed by any tumult or imagination of things corporeal, if it is to comprehend anything of the eternal, boundless light that enlighteneth the whole world. Grant me, O Lord, that in Thy light I may see light, not the light of Heaven, nor the light of earth, not the light of angels, or of men, but the light eternal, uncreated, immense, ineffable, incomprehensible, and unchangeable.

‘Oh, how heavy to me is the burden of the flesh ! how grievous the law of sin in my members, which impedes and withholds from the vision of the celestial

light, from the countenance of the glory of God, from the enjoyment of eternal happiness, from approach to the citizens of Heaven, whom everlasting joy surrounds and fills!

‘Bestow, I beseech Thee, my God, in this brief span of time, heavenly grace and benediction on Thy servant, who as yet am unworthy to drink of the full fountain of the water of life, springing up into life everlasting. Visit me often, most compassionate Jesus. Enkindle in me the vehement flames of Thy love, that I may learn to despise all lower and created things, and to seek only Thee, the one eternal and uncreated good, and to love Thee above all things for Thy own sake.’*

Filled with such thoughts as these, Thomas returned to Mount St. Agnes to take up once more, cheerfully and lovingly, the peaceful routine of his daily duties. During his prolonged absence another had been appointed to assist the Superior as Sub-prior, or Vicar, and thus our Venerable Canon was now free from the burden of office. We can easily imagine that this immunity pleased him well, especially as it left him more leisure for the work which he loved, the work of transcribing and composing. He now, after an interval of three years or more, resumed his great labour of making a fair copy in four volumes of the new Windesheim edition of the Bible. This task was completed in the year 1439.

He then re-wrote his four books of the ‘Imitation,’ and together with them nine other treatises of a similar nature. All these he bound in one volume, placing at the end an inscription to the effect that the

* ‘De Elevatione mentis.’ Oratio ut liberetur mens a corp. imag.

whole work was 'finished and completed in the year of the Lord 1441, by the hand of Brother Thomas Kempis, in Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle.'

Most fortunately, this codex is still extant, and it is preserved among the manuscript treasures of the Royal Library at Brussels. Moreover, a facsimile of that portion of it which contains the four books of the 'Imitation' has been published by an English firm (Elliot Stock), wherein the original is exactly reproduced, page for page, word for word, in the handwriting of the author, printed upon paper made in Holland, in order to represent as closely as possible that upon which the manuscript is written, bound in brown leather, and embossed according to the pattern of a Dutch Horæ of the period. Of all the editions of the 'Imitation' that have ever been issued—and no book save the Bible has been so often and so variously reproduced—I venture to assert that this possesses the greatest interest for bibliophiles in general and for the lovers of à Kempis in particular.

But while engaged in these greater labours, our Venerable Thomas still continued to note in his Chronicle the various events of interest to the community of St. Agnes that occurred in each successive year. Thus we find, each under its proper date, the record now of the admission of some new candidates to the habit, now of the scarcity of crops and consequent plague and death in the surrounding country, now of improvements and additions to the priory, now of the departure of this or that aged Brother to his reward.

As regards this last item, it is worthy of note that à Kempis seems to have been in the habit of frequently

visiting the sick, especially when their end was nigh. His biographers tell us of the charity which he always displayed in his intercourse with the Brethren, and in particular of the great gift which he possessed of consoling and strengthening the tempted and the afflicted. Doubtless, then, he soothed the last agony of many of those whose names he mentions, and fortified them with his words of comfort against those doubts and fears that will assail even the most holy soul when about to appear before the Judge. But doubtless, also, he had another motive in thus charitably visiting the infirm and the dying. He frequented the bedside of these departing saints that he might catch from their lips some word of spiritual wisdom to be treasured up for his own profit or for the edification of others. Sometimes he records these memorable sayings in the Chronicle itself, sometimes he relates them by way of example in his sermons and conferences to the novices or Brethren.

Two remarkable instances of this occur at the period of which we are now treating. The first is narrated of an aged priest, Brother Alardus of Pilsum, who died just after mid-day on the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, May 3, A.D. 1436. It had been his cherished desire to die on this feast, for he had a special devotion towards the holy symbol of our salvation, and when he had the opportunity, he always chose the altar of the Holy Cross for his Mass.

‘In the celebration of the sacred mysteries,’ Thomas writes, ‘he was most attentive and devout. Until his last illness he was ever the first to be present in the choir and in the common refectory of the Brethren. And he often said to me, “The choicest dish I have in

the refectory is the spiritual reading, which I love to hear. And therefore I am always unwilling to be absent, lest I should lose the fruit of the holy reading. I also rejoice much in the presence of the Brethren, for I see the whole Community present and taking refreshment with great discipline." When at length, weighed down by old age, he could no longer walk unsupported, he often came leaning on his stick to the gate of the choir to listen to the Brethren chanting, and then he would take holy water and genuflect towards the High Altar.*

This love for the choir and for the Divine Office was a virtue that our Venerable à Kempis could well appreciate, for it was one of the most remarkable traits of his own beautiful character. Let us listen to the glowing words of Francis Tolensis on this point. We may accept his testimony as absolutely true; for this biographer was a member of the same order and of the same Community as Thomas himself, and he solemnly assures us that in his short *Life of the Venerable Canon Regular* he has rejected all rhetorical flourish and has strictly adhered to the trustworthy accounts found in contemporary manuscripts or handed down by tradition in Mount St. Agnes itself.

'In the church,' writes Francis, 'and in the performance of ecclesiastical ceremonies, it is difficult to describe his rapt attention, and I might say inspiration. While he chanted the psalms, his eyes were ever raised towards Heaven, and he appeared to be filled with a Divine enthusiasm, captivated and carried away by the unutterable sweetness of the

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 62.

holy psalmody ; so that he never stood with his heels resting upon the ground ; that is to say, as he meditated, the tips of his toes alone touched the floor, the rest of his body was lifted heavenwards, whither his soul tended with all its desires. In the Divine Office he always remained standing erect, never sitting, never resting his arm, or leaning back against the stall. Of those that entered the choir, night or day, he was always the first ; of those that left he was always the last. Incredible was his delight in and his love for the Divine worship and the services of the Church. So evident was this pleasure that one day someone remarked to Thomas that he considered him very fortunate, and after all not so much deserving of praise in the alacrity of his voice, the joyousness of his soul, and his piety in singing the psalms, because those psalms were as sweet to him as salmon. "Thanks be to God," Thomas replied, "the psalms are indeed to me as salmon ; nevertheless their taste is frequently turned to bitterness and death, when I perceive any idly inattentive to the matter in hand, or sparing their voice." *

If we compare this testimony of Francis Tolensis concerning the love of à Kempis for the Divine Office with the instructions the holy Canon gives to his novices and younger Brethren on the same subject, we shall be at once struck with the similarity that exists between his practice and his teaching, and we shall not find it difficult to believe that in other matters, even as in this, the Venerable Thomas first tried in his own person the worth of the counsel he

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' Francisco Tolen., n. 2.

offers to us. The eighth chapter of his work on the Discipline of the Cloister treats of the choir and of the due performance of the Divine Office. A few extracts will suffice to prove the truth and force of my remark.

‘The choir,’ he begins, ‘is the consecrated dwelling of God and the Holy Angels. Professed religious in choir resemble the angels in Heaven. It is the work of angels to be always praising God; it is the work of religious to sing psalms and to pray with attentive mind. So stand in the choir and sing as if you were standing in the midst of angels. You should be mindful of our beloved Lord Jesus lying in the manger, or hanging on the cross, or in Heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father; you should so stand and sing as if you were in His presence.

‘A pure life and an unstained conscience rejoice in the things that pertain to God.

‘Having finished the Divine Office, you should not immediately pour yourself out on external things, lest you lose the grace which you have acquired while praying; but rather, after paying the service of your lips, recollect yourself, and, apart from all tumult, remain giving thanks and pondering over the things you have heard chanted. What does it profit to praise God one hour and the next to treat of things worldly and vain?

‘Woe, therefore, to those who burn not with Divine love, but turn themselves to outward trifles, who neither pray nor permit others to pray, and who in the place wherein they ought to atone for their sins there add new crimes to their past offences. Such are those who enter the church slowly and

depart from it with speed; who love short Masses and frequent long banquets; who when they are satiated, amuse themselves with jests and pastimes, and scarcely wait to give short thanks to God for His benefits, because they delight to feed the body rather than nourish the soul. Let not the true religious, devoted to the service of God, act thus; but, mindful of God's eternal mercies, let him strive to pass the night with Jesus in prayer, singing hymns, and psalms, offering the holy Sacrifice, being instant in devout meditations, and ever keeping his heart upraised to God.'*

So much, then, for the conformity that exists between the writings of à Kempis and his daily conduct. I remarked above that in his instructions he made frequent use of the edifying words and deeds of the holy Brethren with whom he lived. The following few lines, which occur in the work just quoted, taken in conjunction with the account given above of the death of Brother Alardus, are a striking illustration of my meaning. 'There are three places,' says the aged Canon, addressing a young religious, 'in which you should delight to be present with the Brethren for the sake of the common discipline, namely, in the choir to chant, in your cell to write or read, in the refectory to eat soberly and to listen to the Word of God.'†

We come now to that other instance I mentioned of the familiar intercourse of Thomas with the dying and of the profit he derived therefrom. 'In the year of the Lord 1443,' writes the pious chronicler, 'our beloved Brother, John Bouman, a priest, once our

* 'De Disciplina Claustral,' c. viii.

† *Ibid.*, c. iii.

Procurator, who had long been ill of the quartan fever and was much weakened in body, finished his life in a happy agony, soon after mid-day, on the Feast of St. Prisca, Virgin and Martyr, January 18. He was born at Zwolle, and many years he lived in the midst of great labours and sufferings; and often he had this sentence of Christ on his lips: "In your patience you shall possess your souls." And towards the end, when I was visiting him, he would say to me: "Oh, how gladly I would daily have attended the choir, if I had been able, God knows." He was very faithful and very compassionate; and he loved to read or hear of the life and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he had a special devotion towards St. Mary Magdalene, because he was born on her feast-day; and he would often say a Mass in her honour, or humbly ask another to say it for him.*

À Kempis then proceeds to relate a vision which was granted to one of the Brethren, possibly himself, about a month before the death of this John Bouman, and which was regarded as a warning of some such event. It seemed to the Brother in question that the Canons were singing the Office of the Dead in the presence of a body laid out in the centre of the choir; and that towards the end of the Office the sanctuary gate opened, some lay Brothers appeared, two of whom had already departed from this world, and then the whole Community, following the body, formed in procession and wended its way to that part of the cemetery which was reserved for the priests. 'And this vision was accomplished in detail, and John Bouman was buried near Brother Christian. He

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 96.

lived in the order of Canons Regular thirty-one years and twenty-six days. He was one of our good and noble friends in Zwolle, and from him and from his family our monastery received a considerable increase in revenue.’*

The reader will have noticed that John Bouman was the Procurator of Mount St. Agnes, and doubtless it is in this connection that à Kempis speaks of him as ‘very faithful and compassionate’—faithful, that is, in the discharge of his onerous duties, and compassionate towards the poor, to whom it was part of his office to distribute the monastery alms. But now he had gone, it was necessary to find another to fill his place. We learn from the ancient biographers of à Kempis that at one time he held the office of Procurator; and though no mention of his election is made in the Chronicle, we may presume that it took place about this time. I will give an account of his duties in this new position, and of the manner in which he discharged them, in the following chapter.

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 96.

CHAPTER XI

Thomas à Kempis as Procurator



THE duties of a Procurator among the Canons of Windesheim were, of course, mainly concerned with the outward business of the house. The Procurator kept an account of all moneys received and expended. It was he that had charge of the lay Brothers and servants, to whom also he was to give a conference, or sermon, once a week. He was allowed to buy and sell cattle for the monastery; but in the acquisition of landed property, and in all matters of greater weight, he was bidden to consult the Prior and follow his directions.

The chapter of the Statutes of Windesheim from which we have gathered these particulars contains a passage that is characteristic of the spirit of fervour and devotion that animated the new Congregation. 'Although the Procurator,' so runs this clause, 'after the example of Martha, whose office he has received, must of necessity be solicitous and troubled about many things, still, he should not altogether cast aside silence and the quiet of his cell. Rather, he should strive (as much as the business of the house permits) to be at his place in choir and refectory. He should also take refuge in his cell, as in a most secure and

peaceful harbour, that there, by reading, prayer and meditation, he may be able to calm the turbulent motions of his breast, arising from the care and settlement of external affairs, and to store up in the recesses of his heart some salutary thoughts, which he may sweetly and wisely expound to those placed under his charge. For the less they know of letters, the more frequently do they need instruction.’*

This admonition we may be sure was fully appreciated and faithfully remembered by our Venerable à Kempis. Still, doubtless, the reader feels some surprise that a man of so retiring a temperament and so contemplative a turn of mind should be appointed to a post that is necessarily accompanied by so much bustle, anxiety and distraction. But the reason assigned by Badius Ascensius is one that does honour both to Thomas himself and to the Canons who elected him : ‘Because they saw him much inclined to giving alms, therefore they made him Procurator of the common funds.’†

À Kempis, then, had not forgotten the lessons of charity which he had learnt at Deventer. He had profited by the example of Father Florence, Brother John, and those other holy companions whose chief delight it had been to relieve the necessities of the poor. But that which is more admirable still is that his Brethren, the Canons of St. Agnes, beholding the pleasure which he displayed in dispensing alms, took occasion thence to place their revenues in his hands in order to give him as ample an opportunity as possible of exercising his charity.

* ‘*Vetus Disciplina*,’ p. 562.

† ‘*Vita Thomas à Kempis*,’ per Jodocum Badium, c. xii.

And it should be remembered that the priory on the Mount had made some considerable progress since the days when John à Kempis, its first Superior, employed his youthful brother Thomas in transcribing manuscripts for the maintenance of the Brethren, and when the two brothers sold their paternal homestead in order to devote its price to the aid of the struggling community. Only three years previous to the death of Bouman, a large guest-house had been built on the west of the monastery. And the year before he died one of the Suffragan Bishops of Utrecht came to St. Agnes and consecrated four pieces of land for the burial of the dead, three for the Brethren, the other for laymen. This latter was an extension to double its original space of the cemetery that had been consecrated with the church, and Thomas informs us that the Bishop granted an indulgence of forty days to all who should devoutly walk around it.

‘He also consecrated,’ adds our chronicler, writing of this occasion, ‘a costly and beautiful image of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the Child Jesus, which stands on the altar dedicated to her and to St. Augustine, in the middle of the church, before the choir; and he granted forty days’ indulgence to anyone devoutly reciting five “Hail Marys” on his knees before the statue. He likewise consecrated another small statue placed in front of the door of our monastery, and granted a forty days’ indulgence to all who knelt there and said devoutly three “Hail Marys.”’*

Now, these signs of the increase and prosperity of

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 96.

the priory, while they should make us honour the more the Canons who chose for their Procurator one remarkable for his charitable disposition and for the very reason that he was so charitable, also indicate to us the weight of the burden that was placed on Thomas's shoulders, and give us some idea of the multiplicity of cares with which he would now be distracted.

As a good religious and a Saint, Thomas would not shirk his duty, however distasteful, but would faithfully discharge every obligation laid upon him by holy obedience. Yet, after all, the natural bent of his character was not towards the engrossing occupations connected with such an office, and doubtless he took the first opportunity of beseeching the Brethren to relieve him of the post. According to the Statutes of Windesheim, once every year the Procurator was to render a faithful account of his stewardship during the last twelve months to the Community, and then he was allowed, and even expected, to tender a resignation of his office. This occasion would be eagerly seized upon by our Venerable à Kempis, and after a time his earnest request was acceded to, 'because,' says Badius, 'he was being called away from holy meditations and from composing most excellent books, which we still possess.'*

But brief as this term of office may have been, it has left one lasting and valuable monument in a work of à Kempis' entitled, 'On the Faithful Steward.' This treatise is divided into three chapters, the first of which contains salutary advice for those engaged in external occupations, the second compares the active

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' per Jodocum Badium, c. xii.

with the contemplative state in the persons of Martha and Mary, and the third treats of the rewards bestowed, even in this life, on those who keep their intention fixed unswervingly on God. The whole, as we would have expected, is replete with spiritual wisdom ; but it also gives evidence of a most sound and practical common-sense. It is a most interesting treatise, for it pictures to us exactly what our Venerable à Kempis thought and did when the voice of obedience called him away from his cell to the worry and bustle of material cares. His Life would be incomplete without a few quotations from this work.

‘ Since, my beloved,’ he begins, addressing himself in the second person, ‘ you have received the office of Martha, you must not perform your good and holy ministry with sloth, but you must fulfil it faithfully for the sake of Christ, Who administers to us all, and for the sake also of your own eternal salvation. With regard to this office, it is necessary that you be advised concerning certain needful considerations. For thus saith blessed Paul : “ It is required of ministers that one be found faithful.”

‘ Whence it behoves him to whom such ministry is entrusted to be faithful—yea, and prudent also, lest he should seem often to err. Faithful, that is, in the things committed to his care, that he neglect nothing, that he guard nothing ill, that he allow nothing which might be serviceable to the Community to be wasted through his fault, but that rather he preserve everything with pious care. Prudent, also, he must be in the distribution of these things according to time and person. For at one time it is better to give that which at another time it were lawful to deny.

Some it is advantageous and charitable to indulge in their requests; others, however, you must resist. And of others, again, you must in brotherly love be even beforehand in supplying the needs. If, therefore, you act discreetly, and weigh the necessities of each, you have not cast prudence aside. Such, then, I would desire you to be: faithful in action and prudent in counsel.’*

After some further words in praise of a faithful servant, the pious author proceeds to speak of trust in God, and of liberality in succouring the needs of others. In this passage it is easy to recognise the disciple of Florence Radewyn and the admirer of John Ketel.

‘When your will is prompt, it is accepted of God, according to that which you have and not that which you have not. When means fail, your excuse is simple, provided no avarice or fear of future want intrude. But while foresight is necessary, care must be taken lest too great parsimony be practised. “Give,” saith the Giver of all things, “and it shall be given unto you.” As long as you have one loaf you shall halve it with Christ.

‘Be more desirous of doing good than of withholding anything for the morrow. He Who gives to-day will give to-morrow also. For that is not given to a miser, so to speak, which is given to Christ, nor to one who is ungrateful, or grasping, or unconscious, or forgetful, so as to give occasion for anxiety over each expenditure in the thought, “Who will give us back aught that is given away?”

‘One thing, however, I know that may seem hard to a man that loves to give: if his hand be closed by

* ‘*De Fidele Dispens*,’ c. i., nn. 1, 2.

obedience to his Superior. And, lest you should lose the virtue of obedience, remember that obedience is better than sacrifice. Still, your good will can wholly accomplish with small means that which you would have desired to do with abundance of wealth. He who is ready to give a little, when he has a little, will certainly not hesitate to give more when, by the favour of God, he is richer.’*

Then follow some instructions on the necessity of prudence, of self-restraint, of frequent prayer, of the custody of the lips, of giving good example, of seeking the advice of Superiors, etc. I will give one extract, which shows how Thomas conducted himself towards those with whom he came into contact in transacting the business of the house :

‘Do not stand long in the open talking about the tasks that have been set while others are occupied and busy working, lest it be said to you : “Why stand you here all the day idle?” Do not give an occasion of much talking to those that come to the door, but hasten them on their way with kind and profitable words. Do not let them depart in sadness, but dismiss them in peace and joy, refreshed with necessary food and drink. Then commend yourselves to their prayers, and say to them : “Now go, dear brothers, and give thanks to God, and pray for me.” And if you add a few words for their consolation, God will reward you well.

‘When any come across your path, you should take thought as to whether they have just cause to approach you ; and, according as it seems to you, give not occasion to one who only wishes for an occasion ;

* ‘De Fidele Dispens.,’ c. i., n. 6.

and so, if you deny yourself to such, you will not repent it afterwards. Still, be always ready to give satisfaction to those that seek you, but allow no one to idle his time with you. Admonish them in a brotherly fashion to pass on, because you have no leisure ; it is Christ that desires to converse with you. In this manner you will free yourself from superfluities, and will lead them to retirement and to the keeping of their cell. Nevertheless, never judge hastily, but consider what motive of charity or fraternal friendship has brought them to you. Act discreetly therefore in this matter, so as sometimes to listen to those that visit you, and sometimes to dismiss those who are anxious to speak with you.*

The first portion of this passage, in which à Kempis speaks of his mode of procedure with those who applied to the monastery for relief, reminds one of another treatise in his works, entitled 'The Consolation of the Poor and the Infirm.' In this the Venerable Canon seems to have committed to writing some of those words of spiritual comfort which he was wont to address while succouring the material wants of the objects of his charity. There is something very beautiful and pathetic in these few fragments.

For instance, his customary greeting to a poor man appears to have been, 'Be not saddened, poor brother, because thou art not rich;' and to those who were suffering from bodily infirmities he would say : 'Murmur not, you who are weak in body and often ill, and possess not that which would give you relief.'†

Then follows a longer exhortation to one whom he

* 'De Fidele Dispens.,' c. i., n. 14.

† 'Consol. Paup. et Infirm.,' nn. 1, 2.

calls 'the infirm Lazarus,' and who was, very probably, a leper. 'Rejoice in the Lord, Brother Lazarus, who art now filled with many wounds. Eternal rest is awaiting thee in recompense for the scanty food, poor and ill-prepared, and for the short-lived pain of body, which thou endurest now. Instead of the crumbs that are now denied thee, thou wilt have glorious feasts in the banquet of the Eternal King, and thou wilt eat for ever the bread of heaven from the table of Jesus Christ in the kingdom of His Father. For the wounds now inflicted on thee thou wilt be adorned with a crown of wondrous beauty, ornamented with flowers of ineffable sweetness. In place of the dogs that now lick thy sores, thou wilt have angels joyfully serving thee, and praising God for thy manifold want and uncomplaining endurance.'*

To still another, who was lame, he addresses the following words: 'Leap for joy, lame brother, who art despised by many because thou canst not run through the streets and squares with the strong and the rich, who rejoice in the various pleasures of the flesh, and suddenly go down into the pit. Do you remain in secret and pray unceasingly for yourself and others, and, above all, render praise to Christ, Who hath withdrawn from thee many occasions of sin, and hath shown thee how to enter through the narrow road the gate of heaven.'†

Let us now see the comparison that à Kempis institutes between the respective merits of the active and the contemplative life.

'Although the part of Mary may be the better choice and the sweeter, yet the laborious part of blessed

* 'Consol. Paup. et Infirm.,' nn. 4, 6.

† *Ibid.*

Martha is praiseworthy and accepted of God, as our Lord Himself assures us in the Gospel: "If any man minister to Me, him will My Father, Who is in heaven, glorify." To minister belongs especially to Martha, as to be at peace belongs to Mary. Still, these two sisters must not be separated from one another, nor should they contend respecting their condition; but they should strive rather to receive Christ in hospitality, so that they may stand without sin in all things, and may progress in the daily increase of virtues.

' Let Martha serve, labour, and provide good things before God and man, so that her sister Mary may be more free to attend to spiritual things. Nor should she murmur against her sister because she leaves her to serve alone; but she should rather encourage her to remain restful and silent, occupying herself with no worldly concerns, but ever keeping before her eyes her Jesus, upon Whom the angels long to gaze.

' On the other hand, Mary ought to compassionate her sister, and often pray the Lord that she may be enabled to minister worthily and devoutly to herself and to others the necessities of this life; to be patient in adversity, faithful and prudent in all her transactions, and so to moderate and order her exterior actions, that she neglect not altogether her interior, but when the time shall come, retire into secret, after her example, to attend a little to her own soul. Remember, Mary, that thou wouldst not be so free and disengaged if Martha were not willing to labour for thee; and if she did not attend to things material, thou wouldst not so sweetly contemplate things spiritual. Advantageous to thee is thy sister's solicitude to prevent all disturbance of thy beloved solitude.

See, then, that thou despise not thy sister, nor judge her less holy because she is engaged with transitory and lowly affairs; think rather of this, the occasion her humble ministry affords thee for contemplation.

‘But take heed, thou also, Martha, who art solicitous over thy constant labour; take heed that thou be not disturbed in thy toil nor fall away in tribulation, for abundant occasions of trouble will come upon thee, and a variety of vexations will not be wanting to thee. Happy art thou if thou endurest all things patiently, and gratefully rememberest that from God proceed both good and evil. Thou hast ever need, then, of patience and prudence: patience to overcome adversity; prudence to deal kindly with others, even though they be ungrateful. Remember Whom thou servest, and for what reward thou workest. Is not Christ He to Whom thou hast wholly devoted thyself?’*

In the third chapter of this work, as I have already remarked, à Kempis speaks of the spiritual consolations freely bestowed upon the soul that denies itself the sweets of contemplation in order to occupy itself at the call of duty with many and distracting cares. And here the saintly author soars to the sublimest heights of mysticism in the exposition of that text of the Canticles (v. 5): ‘My hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers were full of the choicest myrrh’; and of that other (xi. 4): ‘He brought me into the cellar of wine.’ I will give here only the concluding words.

‘Gather from these premises how pious a thing it is to serve the Brethren; how pleasing it is to God;

* ‘De Fidele Dispens.,’ c. ii., nn. 1-4.

how, in a sense, it makes one resemble the angels, of whom we read that they are sent to minister to the heirs of eternal life; and how fruitful it is in virtue, which is more evidently and truly proved by actions than possessed by thought and imagination.

‘The Lord, Who is good and wont ever to reward those that serve Him, will not therefore deny thee the secrets of His sweetness because thou hast shown thyself willing in exterior and lowly occupations.

‘Most happy, O beloved, art thou to whom it is given to experience such delights. But now pray for me, that the Lord may deign to illumine my mind more brightly with His interior consolation, and to keep it untarnished by any dealings with the world.’*

* ‘De Fidele Dispens.,’ c. iii., nn. 9, 10.

CHAPTER XII

The resignation of Theodoric Clive and the election of his successor, William of Deventer—Thomas is re-elected Sub-prior—His sermons to the novices and to the people



AFTER his brief but fruitful experience of the engrossing cares and anxieties incidental to the position of Procurator of a large and not too well provided Community, we now find our Venerable Canon once more untrammelled by the ties of office. But the period of his freedom was not destined to continue long.

The third Prior of Mount St. Agnes, Theodoric Clive, who had been elected nearly twenty-three years previously, when William Vorniken was transferred to Windesheim, feeling now infirmity and old age grow upon him, begged some of the senior Brethren to intercede with the Visitors, then present in the house, to permit him to send in his resignation. These seniors consulted with the other Canons of the Chapter, and all agreed to take compassion upon their beloved Father, who had served them so long and so well. The three Brethren then went to the Fathers who were making the usual biennial visitation at the Mount, and laid before them their reasons for desiring them to accept the aged Prior's resigna-

tion. Understanding that the greater part of the Community were of one mind on this matter, the Visitors notified to Father Theodoric that he was at liberty to tender his resignation. This he did most willingly. In the presence of the assembled Chapter he prostrated himself on the ground, and expressed his desire to lay down the burden he had borne so long.

The Visitors engaged in this affair were the Priors of Windesheim and Zwolle. They had already transacted the ordinary business of the visitation. Other houses were awaiting their visit. They therefore begged the Canons to appoint some other Fathers of the Congregation to the task of formally absolving their Superior from his obligations. The Prior of Amsterdam and the Prior of Hoem, who had been attending the General Chapter and had not yet returned to their monasteries, were accordingly commissioned to carry the matter through. They examined each individual of the Community, and found that, with the exception of a few of the younger members, all were willing to agree to the earnest entreaties of their Prior. Then, by the authority delegated to them, they formally absolved Theodoric Clive from his obligations as Prior of Mount St. Agnes.

The next step was to elect another to fill the vacant post. As a preliminary to this the reverend Fathers enjoined on the Brethren a three days' fast, according to the statutes of their General Chapter. It was now, however, time for the two Priors to return to their respective canonries, and accordingly they begged the Father-General, William Vorniken, to preside over the election in person.

It is evident from all these formalities that it was no easy matter among the Windesheimers for a Superior to free himself from the burdensome honours of office. Among the fervent religious, whose practice it was 'to love to be unknown,' 'ever to seek the lowest place,' 'to desire rather to be subject than to rule,' it was felt that it would be imprudent to allow a Prelate to resign his dignity too easily, lest the regularity and well-being of the Community should suffer from the zeal of individuals for self-abasement and humiliations. The reader will remember, in this connection, the penance imposed upon Father Gerard Naeldwuc when he resigned the priorship of Windesheim.

Thus, in the present instance, nearly a whole year passed from the time that Theodoric Clive expressed his desire to retire into obscurity until the day on which a successor was appointed to take his place. Our Venerable Thomas, in his Chronicle, gives a minute description of the whole ceremony of election, and it is worthy of note that the affair was conducted in exact accordance with the Statutes of Windesheim, a sign that the new Congregation was now established on a firm basis, and that everything connected with its government was in thorough working order.

After the prescribed three days' fast, then, on June 21, 1448, the Community of St. Agnes assembled to sing a votive Mass of the Holy Ghost. It was a Saturday, and so the usual votive Mass of Our Lady was also celebrated, but only as a private Mass. The Canons then proceeded to the chapter-house. The Prior of Windesheim was there, and by his side the Prior of Zwolle. The former addressed

to them a brief allocution, read the form of election, and admonished the Capitulary Fathers to choose a worthy Prior according to the dictates of their conscience and the decrees of Canon Law. The number of Brethren present who had the right of election was twenty-one: two Canons were away, and these had notified their mind by letter.

All then retired from the chapter-house except the two Priors and three of the senior Brethren, who remained standing near the altar to receive there the vote and the opinion of each in his turn. The door was left open, so that the Canons gathered outside could see what was being done, but could not hear what was said as each went up to register his vote. When the result of the scrutiny was made known, it was found that the Sub-prior, Henry William of Deventer, had sixteen voices in his favour. Of the remaining electors three had declined to register their votes, and two had chosen James Cluyt, the Procurator.

Then one of the seniors, in his own name and in the name of the majority, begged the Superior-General to confirm their choice. He deferred, however, to give this confirmation until the morrow, so that in the meantime, according to the constitutions of the Congregation, if any had objections to make, they might have time and opportunity to speak their mind. No one, however, came forward to object either to the manner of election or to the person chosen, and consequently the future Prior was called upon to give his assent to his canonical election, in order that it might be duly ratified.

But he immediately threw himself on his knees,

and, alleging his insufficiency, humbly begged to be freed from such a burden. However, his pleadings were of no avail. The Brethren urged his acceptance of the office; the Father-General commanded it: he durst not disobey; and so, resigning himself to the will of God, he yielded his consent for the sake of fraternal charity and monastic discipline.

The Prior of Windesheim thereupon solemnly confirmed the election. The new Superior was led to the church in presence of all the Community, and, the customary prayers having been recited, he was installed in his place of honour, the first seat in choir. All then returned to the chapter-house. Each in due order promised obedience to the new Father—the Canons first, then the lay Brothers, then the oblates. The rest of the day was celebrated as a festive occasion of great joy and gratitude, and Thomas remarks that in the afternoon they sang the vespers *alacri voce*, in a most joyous tone.

Meanwhile, however, by the elevation of the Sub-prior to the dignity of Superior, the sub-priorate was left vacant, and it now became necessary to elect another to that office. The choice rested principally with the Prior. He was advised, however, to consult the Chapter, and usually the majority of votes settled the matter. On this occasion the voices were all in favour of our Venerable Thomas, and accordingly he was again raised to that position of responsibility and honour which he was so worthy to grace.

I will give the account of this interesting event in his own words: ‘And after three days the Brethren were summoned to the chapter-house, and the Prior proposed that, according to the statutes, they should

choose another Sub-prior. And so, on the Feast of St. James the Apostle (July 25), before the hour of vespers, a brief scrutiny of votes having been made, Brother Thomas Kempis, one of the senior Brethren, now sixty-seven years of age, who had once before been appointed to this office, was elected and nominated. And although he knew that he was unfit and tried to excuse himself, still, at the voice of obedience, he submitted to the council of his Brethren, and refused not to labour for them, for the love of Jesus Christ, earnestly soliciting the prayers of his associates and Brethren, trusting more in the grace of God than in himself.*

We cannot doubt the sincerity of this protestation on the part of our humble Thomas; still, it is worthy of note that, so highly was humility prized and so universally inculcated among the Canons of Windesheim, his action on this occasion was only in strict conformity with the statutes of the Congregation. 'When a Sub-prior is to be elected,' so runs the first clause of the chapter that treats of this Superior, 'he should be chosen by the Prior according to the advice of some discreet Brothers or of the more numerous and prudent part of the Capitular Fathers. And when he has been named by the Prior, let him immediately arise and, advancing, prostrate himself before the Prior. Then, rising at a sign from the Prior, and declaring that he is unworthy and unsuited for this burden, let him humbly seek to be released. But if the Prior will not yield to his petition, let him again prostrate himself; then, rising at the bidding of the Prior, let him humbly beg the prayers of the Brethren,

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 104.

and henceforth he shall be the first on the left side of the choir.’*

This same chapter, in describing the office of a Sub-prior, gives us a fairly accurate idea of the duties which à Kempis was now a second time called upon to fulfil. Of course the Sub-prior was chiefly in request when the Prior was absent, an occasion of by no means infrequent occurrence. At such times all matters of weight were to be referred to him; but if any exigency arose which exceeded his powers, he was to delay its settlement, if possible, until the Prior’s return.

The same reverence and obedience were to be shown to him as to the Prior himself. By those addressing him, he was to be called ‘Father’; when not present he was to be spoken of as the ‘Sub-prior.’ All permissions were to be sought of him in the temporary or continued absence of the Prior; but he was to be more chary of granting dispensations than his Superior: ‘for when the Prior is away, it becomes us to observe the more strictly our customs, and constitutions, and every point of discipline.’† Finally, ‘to the Sub-prior it chiefly appertains to warn the Prior on any point in which he may have been blameworthy, or negligent, whether he shall have observed it himself, or shall have been informed of it by others; but before others he should strive to excuse him as much as possible.’‡

The reader will observe that, as I have remarked before, no mention is made here that the Sub-prior should have charge of the novices. However, from various passages in the Chronicles we gather that this

* ‘*Vetus Disciplina*,’ pp. 560, 561.

† *Ibid.*

‡ *Ibid.*

duty was usually attached to the sub-priorate : it has ever been a constant tradition among the biographers of à Kempis that he actually was engaged for years in the work of training young religious : and, finally, if we had no other proof, the numerous sermons and instructions to novices which he has committed to writing would be sufficient to remove all reasonable doubt on the matter.

Thirty of his sermons to novices, properly so called, are extant. They are headed by the following beautiful prologue, or dedication: ‘To my beloved Brothers in Christ, Innocentius, Simplicianus, and other disciples of the Crucified and lovers of the discipline of holy religion ; a brother pilgrim, dwelling in the vale of tears, humbly beseeches the aid of your prayers.

‘May the peace of Christ abound in your hearts and may much patience be granted to you and to me in the Cross of Christ.

‘The sermons which at various times I have delivered to our novices by way of sweet conference, I have gathered into one; and I have deemed it a pious and good deed to communicate the same to you. Although, therefore, the style may be unadorned and the matter by no means deep ; desirous, nevertheless, to please simple souls, I freely offer for the reading of the pious and devout that which the Lord hath inspired and bestowed. And if perchance an indiscreet word may offend, I pray that pardon be granted to a little one, and that which outwardly sounds absurd be changed for something better.

‘And since examples often move the hearers more than mere words, therefore, instructed by the

custom of St. Gregory in many places, at the end of some sermons, for better illustration, I have briefly noted some examples as they occurred to my memory.

‘Graciously receive, then, Brethren, that which I offer to you as dear friends. Pray that all things may tend to the glory of God and the good of souls.’*

The sermons themselves are just what we should have expected after such an introduction, and from the general tenor of à Kempis’ writings, and especially the ‘Imitation.’ Simple and unaffected in style, and replete with apt quotations from the Scriptures, they are fraught with heavenly wisdom and overflowing with unctuous devotion, and yet withal they manifest a keen observation of human nature and a sound, practical common-sense. The subjects chosen are, of course, especially adapted to the young religious, such as the happiness of the monastic life, the necessity of obedience, humility, patience, chastity, perseverance, the love of solitude and silence, the reverence due to Superiors, and devotion to our Lord, to His Blessed Mother, and the saints. The examples which he occasionally adds to his discourses are simple and edifying. Many of them are culled from his own experience; others he received from the lips of his elder Brethren and the instructors and associates of his youth.

For instance, in the following example I have little doubt he is speaking of himself and of the companion of his younger days, Arnold Schoonhaven: ‘There were two Devout Brothers pursuing their studies in the Congregation at Deventer,’ says Thomas at the end of a discourse on humble submission to Superiors,

* ‘Serm. ad Novit.,’ Prologus.

‘and once they were conversing together on the virtue of obedience. Said one, therefore, to the other, his companion: “It has always gone ill with me when, neglecting advice, I have acted according to my own will.” The other replied: “And I have never had cause to regret following good counsels.” I know an aged Brother,’ he adds, ‘who in his youth was ever willing to listen to the words of his elders; but he grieves very much that he has allowed many things to escape his memory.’*

In another place, after treating of the custody of the lips and the grace of interior devotion, he quotes as the words of a Devout Brother the following: ‘Happy the solitary religious to whom the world is a place of exile, whose country is heaven, whose cell is his paradise. Happy the religious devout towards God, unknown to the world, to whom the town is a prison, the cloister a garden of delights; to whom toil is repose, solitude recreation, mourning joy, silence a refuge of peace. Happy he whose food is spiritual reading, whose drink is prayer, whose pleasure is psalmody, whose meditation is Christ, whose contemplation is God. Happy the religious who directs all his labours and all his exercises to the acquisition of virtues and the accomplishment of the will of God, who in word or deed never betrays aught of singularity, heedful in all places not to offend God or his neighbour. Happy the man who takes it in good part when anyone corrects him or instructs him aright, lest he should remain in error and come to an evil end. Happy is he who keeps a strict guard over his mouth, lest he should utter an idle or a harmful

* ‘Serm. ad Novit.,’ Pars secund., viii.

word. Such a one shall possess great peace, and shall enjoy a good conscience and repute, and shall obtain the grace of a special devotion.

‘He who is patient and silent will put an end to many quarrels. The religious who bides in obscurity is as a light shining securely in the night. The wind will blow, and will do him no harm that attends to God and prays. Truly there is a great treasure in the mouth of a wise man, but there is no less a treasure in the heart of him that is silent and prays. A certain candid man once said: “Whatever good I gain by silence, almost all this I lose by speaking with men.” Because Samson revealed his secret to a woman, and did not conceal the parable of the honey, afterwards he was captured and derided by his enemies. It is good, therefore, for a religious to observe silence, and to carry his words to the home of his mind as a sack full of gold.’*

I have already remarked on our Venerable Canon’s love of the beautiful services of the Church, and on his diligence and fervour in chanting the Divine Office. In one of his sermons he warns the novices of the evils of giving way to drowsiness at the midnight hours of Matins and Lauds. Every night the Brethren were aroused by the sacristan, who was also called the guardian of the sacristy, or simply the guardian. Among the other duties of this cleric was that of ringing the bells for Matins, the first at eleven o’clock or twelve, according to the length of the office to be recited, the second about a quarter of an hour later—rather less in summer, and rather more in winter.

* ‘Serm. ad Novit.,’ Pars secund., iv.

On this point à Kempis remarks: 'When, therefore, at the approach of midnight, the guardian comes and arouses us, let us immediately awake at the sound of the bell, and let us prepare ourselves by devout prayer for our entrance into the choir, and let us hasten with burning torches to meet our heavenly Spouse. Let us, my dear Brothers, strive to cast off all sloth from our bodies and all sleepiness from our eyelids. Let us lift up our hands to Heaven to praise our Creator with joyous voices and pure minds, lest perchance our most cunning enemy prevail over us and laugh at some yawning, others singing but little, and others out of tune.'*

In one of his examples at the end of this sermon our Venerable Thomas speaks of a Canon of his acquaintance who was much troubled with drowsiness during Divine Office, and who resorted to various ingenious but painful devices to keep himself awake. 'When heavy with sleep in choir, he pulled out the hairs of his head with his hand, roughly chafed his beard, pricked his nose with a pen, rubbed his eyes with spittle, and sometimes placed a sharp piece of wood under his chin, in order to overcome his drowsiness.'†

In the same place, in another example, he speaks of a Canon who had a great love and devotion for the Divine Office, and who with a few kind words encouraged another religious not quite so fervent in the duties of the choir. The description which à Kempis gives of this Canon fits in very well with what we have learnt of Father William Vorniken, who was for so many years the Prior of Mount St.

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars prima, vi.

† *Ibid.*

Agnes; but we must confess also that it equally applies to the speaker himself.

‘There was a certain Brother in the order of Regulars devout towards God, well lettered, a gifted singer, and an ardent lover of the Divine praise. On a certain occasion he was speaking in a friendly manner with another Brother on the sweetness of the sacred chant and of the solemn offices which are celebrated in the Church on the great festivals. For his edification, therefore, and in order to encourage him to overcome his weakness and to sing more cheerfully in choir, he said: “Brother, praise be to God, I have never experienced weariness in the Divine Office, however long it might be. For on Palm Sunday, for instance, although the service seems very long in comparison with that of other days, yet I have never grown weary of the length of the chant, but have always felt so ready to sing that if anyone had wished to commence it all over again from the beginning, I would willingly have begun and sung with him.” On hearing this, the aforesaid Brother was edified, and was made more willing to sing. And the elder could well be believed, for he was always one of the first present at the Hours; he rarely left the choir, and when necessity compelled him to go, he speedily returned; and while present he sincerely did his best to assist in the chanting, and he never fixed his eyes on other matters.’*

In addition to his sermons to the novices, the Venerable à Kempis occasionally addressed a discourse, or conference, to the professed Canons. Nine of these lectures are still extant. They treat chiefly

* ‘Serm. ad Novit.,’ Pars prima, vi.

of self-denial, detachment from the world, chastity, and that which Thomas never tired of praising—solitude and silence.

Moreover, after a time, the holy Canon's fame as a preacher spread abroad, and crowds flocked to the Mount to listen to the words of spiritual wisdom that flowed so readily from his lips. Yet, standing as he ever was in the presence of God, with his mind ever fixed on the things of God, à Kempis never ventured to address the faithful without previous preparation.

Sometimes, also, as his biographer, Francis Tolensis, assures us, before he ascended the pulpit he would retire to his cell and there sleep awhile. Nor need we be surprised at this. As we have already seen, the Canons Regular of Windesheim spent an hour or two at midnight in the choir, chanting Matins and Lauds. After this Office they returned to the dormitory, and there slept until five o'clock in the summer, or half-past six in the winter. At this hour they were again aroused by the bell calling them to Prime. The interval between Matins and Prime was, however, usually spent by Thomas not on his couch, but at his table composing and writing. Hence it is not strange that sometimes he should feel the need of a little rest before addressing a large congregation. Moreover, many of the eminent preachers and lecturers of these latter days acknowledge that nothing so invigorates and refreshes them and so prepares them for the display of energy and vivacity necessary in a public speaker as a short sleep before they are called upon to appear—a curious point of agreement between the modern orator and the medieval Saint.

Sommalius has preserved for us thirty-six of these

sermons of à Kempis to the people. They treat successively of the chief mysteries of our redemption, from the foreshadowing of the Messiah in the Old Testament to the first congregation of the disciples in Jerusalem. Whether or no he delivered them as they are written is uncertain; but, as the learned editor justly remarks, they may be regarded as either sermons or meditations: sermons that provide most suitable matter for pious meditation, meditations that afford most excellent thoughts for sermons.

CHAPTER XIII

A Papal Jubilee—The Visitation of Cardinal Cusa—Prosperity of Mount St. Agnes—Longevity and austerity among the Canons of Windesheim—Reasons for the longevity of à Kempis himself—His thoughts in old age turn to the companions of his youth

T is now time for us to have another look at the 'Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes.' For this simple record, besides throwing light on the monastic life of the middle ages, gives us also an account of the events that varied a little the even tenor of our Venerable Canon's daily life. Moreover, as it is written by his own hand, it enables us to see those events from the very point of view from which he himself regarded them.

In the year in which à Kempis was re-elected Sub-prior, A.D. 1448, a great scarcity of corn and other grain was caused by the devastations of innumerable mice. 'Whereupon our lay Brothers made ditches,' says Thomas, 'and placed in them jars full of water, and by this device they killed more than many thousands in different places.'*

However, this remedy was applied too late to prevent a considerable loss in their crops. Then, to

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 104.

add to their misfortunes, in the month of September a terrible tempest swept the neighbouring sea and caused the waters to rise and overflow their pasture-land, thereby destroying much that the rodents had spared. 'Nevertheless,' adds à Kempis, 'the compassionate and merciful Lord once more provided for us, for our fishermen from the flooded waters took a great quantity of fish, which sufficed a long time for the sustenance of our Brethren and guests.'*

The next item in the Chronicle is an account of the acquisition of some relics for their church. 'In the year of the Lord 1449, on the Feast of St. Bernard, Abbot (August 20), we received the precious relics of some holy martyrs, namely, of the companions of Gereon, prince and martyr, and of the company of the eleven thousand sainted virgins in Cologne, which the Venerable Lord Abbot of St. Panthaleon sent us from the numerous relics of his monastery. Also an oblate, Egbert Tyveren, brought back to us from Cologne as authentic relics some small fragments of relics from the Carthusians and from our Brothers the Canons Regular at Corpus Christi. Our Prior and Community, forming into procession in the choir, with the standard of the Cross and lighted candles, carried these relics into the church, and afterwards the Prior duly enclosed them in different altars to the honour of the saints.'†

This gift seems to have been much prized by the Brethren, and henceforth we find à Kempis speaking of the presence of the relics. For instance, a certain aged Canon had been suffering acute pain for some time, when a good lay Brother came and advised him

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 104.

† *Ibid.*, p. 105.

to go downstairs and sit by the fire to see whether that would relieve him. He consented, and together they descended from the dormitory. 'Coming, therefore, to the gate of the choir,' says Thomas, 'he opened the door, wishing to implore the help of God. And so he entered the choir and knelt down on the step in front of the high altar, in the presence of the Sacrament. And when he had begun to pray in the sight of the Lord and before the sacred relics enclosed in the altar, by degrees the pain lessened, and, taking courage, he prayed the more until the pain had ceased. Then, rising, he gave thanks to God and His Saints, and to Christ's martyr St. Panthaleon, whose feast it was that day, and whom he sincerely loved. Afterwards, with a lightened heart, he went round the altar and devoutly kissed the tabernacle door, and then he descended to the other altars in the church praying and giving thanks; and he became so well, that he was enabled the same day to go with the Brethren to their labour and to the choir.'*

Among the other events of A.D. 1450 our Venerable Thomas makes note of the jubilee proclaimed that year by Pope Nicholas V. From a very early age the Holy See had been accustomed to grant a plenary indulgence in the closing year of each century to all who, in a spirit of penance, should make a pilgrimage to Rome, and visit on fifteen different days the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul. On these occasions the Eternal City would be thronged with crowds of the faithful from all parts of the world. In the jubilee year that occurred during the reign of Boniface VIII., A.D. 1300, 200,000 pilgrims gathered round

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars tertia, xi., n. 13.

the holy Father. The interval between one jubilee and another was afterwards reduced successively to fifty, thirty-three, and twenty-five years, and hence we find it in the present instance being celebrated in the middle of the century. A journey, however, to Rome in those times was not exactly the easy feat it is to-day, and à Kempis remarks : ‘ Then many of those Christians who undertook the pious pilgrimage returned in safety ; but many died on the way, and many in the city of Rome.’*

It would appear that none of the Canons of Windesheim accompanied these pilgrims. Indeed, it was not in accordance with their spirit of retirement to go abroad, even for such a work of piety as this. However, they were not deprived of the indulgences attached to the pilgrimage. Just at that time the Papal Legate, Nicholas Cusa, a Cardinal-priest of the title of St. Peter-in-Chains, was visiting the provinces of Germany and the Netherlands, in order to reform the abuses that had crept into the various churches and monastic orders. Having passed through Austria, Thuringia, Saxony, and Westphalia, he came to the Low Countries, and there hastened to inspect the houses of the new Congregation of Windesheim.†

The Cardinal visited in turn Northorn, Diepenheim, Windesheim, Zwolle, and Kampen. In each of these establishments he was delighted and edified by the spirit of fervour, simplicity, and devotion which he witnessed, and was struck with wonder at the marvellous progress which the new Congregation had made in the brief period that had elapsed since its

* ‘ Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 105.

† See Appendix.

foundation. In the convent of Diepenheim alone he found a hundred choir-nuns and a proportionate number of lay Sisters, oblates, and dependents.

John Busch tells us of the joy and magnificence with which the representative of the Holy See was received at Windesheim. In addition to his retinue, the priory, on the night of his arrival, entertained a hundred guests. When morning dawned—it was the Octave of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary—after Prime of the day, a certain Bishop, the companion of his travels, delivered a beautiful discourse in the chapter-house, and then the Cardinal added a magnificent discourse of his own. After that he celebrated High Mass with great solemnity, as befitted the occasion, many ministers assisting him at the altar, and our Brethren chanting in choir. Then also he took his dinner in the refectory, together with the Community, his attendants showing him all the honour due to his rank; and, according to the prescriptions of the Regular observance, he kept silence during the meal and listened to the sacred reading. In all these events he manifested great urbanity in word and deed, and proved in the sight of all how much he loved our monastery and all its inmates and all the Fathers and Brothers and nuns of our Chapter, and he testified in public that these same friendly sentiments were entertained towards us by our Apostolic Lord, the Supreme Pontiff, also.*

It was then, A.D. 1451, that the Cardinal granted, on the fulfilment of certain conditions, to all the subjects of Windesheim the plenary indulgence that might have been gained the previous year by the pilgrimage

* 'Chron. Wind.,' Lib. I., c. xxxvi.

to Rome. The question was also put to him at this time whether a religious, acting on the universal invitation of the holy Father to visit the tombs of the Apostles, might set out on the journey without any further permission from his immediate superiors. The Prelate replied that he had received from the lips of Nicholas himself that 'Obedience is better than an indulgence.' Both Busch and à Kempis record this answer. Evidently the case had been much discussed among the religious of that day, and the Windesheimers, at least, were both pleased and edified with the decision of the Pope as related by his Legate. I might mention here, to the honour of the house, and, indeed, of the whole Congregation of Windesheim, that when Cardinal de Cusa proceeded to reform the monasteries of Lower Germany, he chose for his companion the chronicler from whom we have borrowed these details, the learned and devout Canon Regular, John Busch.

Besides the incidents occurring at St. Agnes itself, à Kempis often mentions events that took place in the busy world without. It will usually be found, however, that these occurrences also were more or less closely connected with his monastery, his Brethren, or his order. Thus, in 1450 he notes that the people of Zwolle built a large wooden bridge across the Vechte, a river that ran through the priory grounds. It is easy to imagine that this bridge would be a great convenience to the numbers that now flocked to the church and monastery on the mount. Thomas adds that the cost of this bridge was reckoned at 600 Rhenish florins; possibly the Brethren of St. Agnes had to take their share in this expense.

In the following year he records the plague that raged at Cologne, and carried off some 25,000 of its inhabitants. His interest in this calamity is easily explained by the fact that in the same year the Canons Regular of Corpus Christi in that city were affiliated to the Windesheim Congregation, and that one of his own Brethren, Father Henry Kremer, had been sent thither as Sub-prior of the annexed foundation.

In 1452 the pious chronicler mentions a great fire that burnt down some two-thirds of the town of Amsterdam, 'a famous and populous city of Holland.' Fourteen monasteries were destroyed in the conflagration, and Thomas notes that the Congregations of the Devout Brothers and Sisters suffered severely amidst the general distress.

Meanwhile we continue to meet further signs of steady progress and prosperity in our Venerable Canon's beloved cloistral home. Thus, A.D. 1451, a new mill was built for the monastery, and at great labour and cost, as Thomas remarks. Moreover, the church was improved, and its accommodation to the needs of the community increased by the addition of four new altars, which were consecrated by one of the Suffragan Bishops of Utrecht, A.D. 1455. 'The first,' writes our chronicler, 'situated on the north side, was dedicated in honour of St. Michael and all the Holy Angels. The second, lower down on the same side, was consecrated in honour of the holy confessors, Gregory, Ambrose, Jerome, Bernard, Francis, and Lebuin. The third altar, in the middle of the church, was placed under the invocation of the saintly confessors, St. Martin, Bishop; St. Willibrord, Bishop; St. Nicholas, Bishop; and St. Anthony, Confessor. The

fourth altar, in the last place on the south side, was dedicated to SS. Ann, Elizabeth, and Monica, the mother of our holy Father St. Augustine, and all holy widows.

‘He also consecrated some holy images : a crucifix over the gate of the choir ; an image of St. Augustine, Bishop ; an image of St. Agnes, Virgin ; and two small images of St. Mary Magdalene, and St. Agnes in a shrine. Also, over the altar of the Holy Cross, a picture of the Blessed Mary, holding Jesus Crucified lying on her breast ; a picture of St. James the Apostle ; an image of St. Catherine, Virgin ; and of St. Barbara, Virgin and Martyr.’*

À Kempis also continues to record, year by year, the admission of new members to the community, or the departure of this or that beloved Brother to his reward. Of these items, however, the first class usually contains only the name and the birthplace of the young novice, and the particular feast on which he was clothed ; and in the other, the instances vary only in minor details. One feature, common to nearly all these obituaries, and a most pleasing feature, too, is the advanced age to which the religious, whether Canons or lay Brothers, attained.

And yet the life they led was most austere. During half the year, and that the colder season, namely, from the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, until the following Easter, they took but one meal a day, the evening collation consisting merely of a drink of wine or beer. From Easter until September 14 they were allowed two meals a day, the dinner about mid-day, and a supper in the

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 113.

evening. Mondays, Wednesdays, and, of course, Fridays, were days of abstinence. The whole of Advent was observed with the full rigour of Lent. All the vigils of our Lady's festivals, the vigil of Corpus Christi, and of the Feast of St. Augustine, together with the Rogation days, were days of fasting and abstinence. With this scanty nourishment, which nowadays would be considered so insufficient, they were expected to pass the whole day, with the exception of about an hour after dinner, in silence, continually employed in works of piety, in manual labours, and in literary pursuits. Moreover, as we have already seen, their sleep was of the shortest, and was broken at midnight for the recitation of Matins and Lauds. Their clothing also was of the poorest and coarsest. They were never permitted to wear linen next to the skin; linen sheets, also, and feather beds were absolutely forbidden except to the infirm. In all matters of raiment and bed-covering, Prelate and subject alike were warned not to consider the quality of the material, but to be content if they had sufficient to protect them from the inclemency of the weather and to cover their nakedness.

But of all the Brethren who, in spite of this severe regime, arrived at such a green old age, none lived so long as à Kempis himself. Yet, it need hardly be said, he by no means spared himself in the practice of austerities. Of fasting he speaks everywhere in his works in terms of the highest praise. He regarded its observance as one of the essential duties of the religious life, as a most efficacious means of satisfying for sin, a salutary curb on the wantonness of the flesh, a powerful incentive to virtue, and a sure

method of obtaining the favours of spiritual consolation and devotion. One of his thirty-six sermons, or meditations, is devoted to 'The sacred institution of the Lenten Fast, after the example of Jesus Christ.'

Of his love of prayer, and especially of the Divine Office, I have already spoken. Equally remarkable was his love of labour. 'Idleness,' says his biographer, the Canon Regular Tolensis, 'he ever avoided as a thing most fatal, and the source of all evil. And that he had the greatest regard for time as a thing most precious and irrevocable, the many volumes which he has left us, some composed by himself and some copied by his hand for general use, sufficiently testify.'*

Moreover, Thomas thus addresses himself in words that reveal to us his character and his habitual conduct: 'Let thy cell be to thee thy paradise, the choir thy heaven, the spiritual reading thy food. Let silence be to thee as a friend, labour a companion, prayer an aid. In the choir be composed and quiet, intent on thyself alone and on God. In thy cell be found either reading, or praying, or working. Pass not to the places where many meet and talk, keep thyself solitary and occupied with good thoughts. When working or taking recreation with others speak rarely, or but little. Go abroad but seldom, and, if thou art called forth, quickly return. Wherever thou oughtest to be, thither hasten without delay.

'Be humble and reserved in thy manners, and keep all thy senses under discipline. Learn to suffer for God in every necessity and grievance. Be not impor-

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' per Franc. Tol., n. 9.

tunate, but do all things with tranquillity. With patience and humility thou shalt overcome all adversities. Do manfully, and let thy heart be strengthened, and the enemy will flee.’*

We have already seen how he was wont to deprive himself even of some of the scanty sleep taken by his Brethren, and allowed by the constitutions. He was also in the habit of scourging himself severely on certain days of the week with a discipline, singing the while a hymn, possibly composed by himself, entitled, ‘Stetit Jesus.’ And, finally, the following extract shows us what he thought and felt on the subject of self-denial in general.

‘Oh, how happy is this mortification which opens to me the gate of eternal life! Blessed John, the Evangelist, heard a voice from heaven saying to him: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. From henceforth now, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours.” Truly a heavenly word, to die to sin, and to do violence to nature. For never is true interior peace found unless a man be dead to himself and to the world, and daily dispose himself to die anew. For every day it behoves me to purpose to be willing to die for Christ, and to begin afresh to amend my life, and to prepare myself to suffer and to die, and to overcome myself. Yea, every hour and every moment it behoves me to strive to go out of myself and utterly to leave myself for Christ, and in His love to deny and annihilate my self-love. For as much as I abandon for Christ, thus much do I gain; and as much as I go out of myself, thus much do I progress. Where I forsake myself, there I find myself; and

* ‘Alia Spirit. Exercit.,’ c. xv.

where I seek myself, there I lose myself. Where I aim at my own convenience, there I injure myself.’*

It was not, then, to a life of ease and self-indulgence that our Venerable à Kempis owed his longevity. To what, then, may we reasonably attribute his length of days? Of course, much must be allowed to a naturally strong and hardy constitution. We are informed that he was not tall of stature, but possessed of a well-knit frame; that his colour was fresh, though swarthy; that his eye was remarkably piercing; and that he never used spectacles until the day of his death. All this indicates an habitual condition of robust health and vigour. Much also must be attributed to the fact that in all things he practised great moderation, and that he ever strove to possess his soul in peace. He used especially to warn the young religious committed to his charge against those indiscretions into which pious souls are so apt to fall, and as it was ever his practice first to do and then to teach, we may justly regard these words of advice as a sample of the principles by which he regulated his own conduct.

‘The servant of God,’ he says, ‘ought to do all things with the moderation of discretion. Strive, then, to hold the royal road, so that you fail not before the end come, either by being too indulgent to the flesh, or too rigid through fervour. If you wish to follow a secure rule of life, proceed by the middle way between the two extremes; so that you do not through pride try anything above your strength, nor omit through sloth anything of which you are capable. God does not require of you the destruction of your body, but

* ‘De Mortificatione Suiipsius,’ n. 2.

the curbing of your vices. He does not demand impossibilities, but He requires that which is advantageous for your salvation. He gives wholesome counsel and provides the necessities of life, so that you may wisely employ the services of the body for the wellbeing of the soul, and may in nothing exceed the measure of discretion.

‘For to run to-day and to-morrow to lie aweary, is not to make progress, but to confound one’s self and to impede progress. To wish now to have nothing and to-morrow to take superfluities, is not to love poverty, but to nourish cupidity. Now to refuse necessities and to-morrow to seek dispensations, is not to cultivate abstinence, but to excite greed. Now to be unwilling to eat what is set before one and to-morrow to murmur of want of food, is not a sign of a mortified soul, but a proof of impatience. Now to read or write so much that a headache follows, is not to nourish the soul, but to render it incapable of further good works. To-day not to utter a word and to-morrow to be dissipated, or to break silence, is not to have a love of the order, but to scandalize many in the order. To-day to sing so high that to-morrow you cannot chant, or can scarcely open your mouth to sing, is not to praise God, but to disturb others in choir. Whatever exceeds due measure and does not abide by discretion does not please God, and cannot endure long.’*

The spirit of prudence, then, which à Kempis evinces in this wholesome counsel doubtless preserved him from anything like excess even in good, and thus enabled him to continue the longer in the faithful and

* ‘De Disciplina Claustral,’ c. ix.

fruitful service of God and his order. To this, again, contributed his habitual peace and serenity of soul. It was one of his golden rules never to interfere in that which did not concern him; another was to see in every incident the hand of God. The former practice saved him from much unprofitable worry and distractions. The latter enabled him to bear with equanimity all the so-called misfortunes of life, and to be indulgent and unruffled in those more trying cases where this individual or that was manifestly culpable. And in these days, when so many well-meaning people shorten their lives by sharing the restless spirit of the age, and suffer such continual wear and tear from constant fretting at trifling annoyances, it will be readily conceded how much must have been gained by that unvarying equipoise of soul which it was always the endeavour of our Venerable Canon to maintain.

But, viewing the matter from a higher standpoint, may we not well conceive that this length of days was vouchsafed by Divine Providence to the saintly old man for much the same purpose as that for which the ancient patriarchs were permitted to dwell so long on earth? May it not be that he was thus left in this place of exile to transmit to the rising generations of his Brethren the spirit that had animated the early Fathers of the order, and to keep alive among them the traditions which he had himself received from their founders?

And, in effect, this is precisely what we find him doing in these later days. The reader will remember the account already given of his youth at Deventer, and of the edifying lives of his instructors and

associates there. These beautiful biographies were written by him in the evening of his own life, in that calm twilight of old age when the tumult of the busy day is over, and the mind can look back and recall each incident of long ago with a vividness and precision that would be impossible while the present is crowded with events possessing an absorbing interest of their own. And his principal object in this labour of love was to place before the young religious under his care living models of obedience, charity, poverty, detachment, mortification, devotion—all those virtues which he was ever striving to inculcate both by word and example.

That he succeeded at least in exciting in his audience an admiration for the ideals he proposed and an earnest desire to imitate the virtues for which they were conspicuous, is manifest from the little dialogues which à Kempis records as taking place between himself and his novices when he first related these Lives to them. For instance, after hearing of the virtues of Father Gronde and Father Brinkerinck, a novice exclaims: ‘Happy Deventer, that was adorned with such priests! But pursue the task which you have begun, and do not conceal from me those things which I have not yet heard.’*

And the master makes reply: ‘Your earnest petition demands that I should describe to you some particulars which you do not yet know. But what can a mind weighed down by its own iniquities express of the virtues of perfect men! However, since from motives of piety I have made a beginning, pay equal attention to that which follows.’†

* ‘*Vitæ Discip. D. Florentii*,’ iv.

† *Ibid.*

And after listening to his glowing account of Arnold Schoonhaven, whose biography is the last of the series, a novice almost sadly remarks: 'When I hear of the life of these men, I am obliged to despise my own life, because I perceive in them how far distant I am still from the possession of many virtues. However, I hope to profit by what I have heard you relate, for I heartily intend to amend myself.'*

And the ancient instructor rejoins: 'Therefore have I briefly informed you of these things that you might endeavour to give yourself to fervour of spirit, and might rejoice to be engaged in lowly employments, and that you might never aspire to any dignity or honourable office, but might labour to subject yourself in all things and to root out vicious habits, that thus you might be more pleasing to God, Who also gives a special grace of devotion to the humble, and Who, after the toil of this present life, bestows eternal glory on those that have been well purified. Amen.'†

* 'Vitæ Discip. D. Florentii,' xi.

† *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XIV

Last days of à Kempis—The reliquary of St. Agnes—The devotion of the Venerable Canon towards this Virgin Martyr, towards his Patron Saint, and towards the Blessed Virgin—His love of Jesus, and his ardent longings to be dissolved—His peaceful passing away at the age of ninety-one

OUBTLESS, as he uttered and afterwards wrote the concluding words of the preceding chapter, the Venerable Canon wondered within himself when his turn would come to lay down the burden of the present life, and receive the eternal glory awaiting all those who have been well purified. And, indeed, the loss, one after another, of all those who had been his Brothers on the Mount for so many long and happy years could not but cause him to sigh for the day when he should join them in their everlasting repose.

Father Theodoric Clive, the good Superior under whom à Kempis had first held the office of Sub-prior, and at whose resignation he had been elected to the same dignity again, departed to his reward in the year 1453, 'old and full of days,' says the Chronicle, 'at the age of seventy-six, after fifty-five years spent in religion.*' In A.D. 1455, the Venerable Prior of

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 110.

Windesheim, William Vorniken, who had governed Mount St. Agnes for seventeen years, also closed his long and holy career, at the age of eighty-two. And then, in A.D. 1458, Father Henry of Deventer, who had succeeded Father Theodoric in the priorship, worn out by illness, resigned his office and four years later he also died.

These successive deaths à Kempis must have regarded as warnings bidding him to prepare to render his account. For this purpose he would wish to retire as much as possible from active work, in order that in solitude he might plume his soul for its heavenward flight. Moreover, despite his energy and activity, the duties of the Sub-prior of an establishment so extensive as that to which the humble monastery on the Mount had now increased could not but prove trying to a man of his advanced years and quiet ways. And so we should naturally expect that about this time he would tender his resignation. And as the Prior's consent was sufficient ratification, not much difficulty would be experienced in acceding to his request.

In effect, something of the kind seems to have taken place. For under the date A.D. 1458 we find an entry in the Chronicle to the effect that 'on the morrow of the Nativity of the Blessed and Glorious Virgin Mary (September 8) our beloved Brother and the Sub-prior of the house, Brother Henry Ruhorst, died at the age of forty, and was buried in the western cloister by the side of our Brother William Coman.* From this item it is evident that our Venerable Thomas had been relieved of his office some time

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 118.

previously ; but the exact date of his resignation is not given, neither do we know the name of Father Henry's successor.

It is pleasant to think of the saintly Canon passing his declining days in the quiet of his cell, 'reading, writing, or praying,' as he says himself. His biographer, Francis Tolensis, speaks of a picture of the holy old man which was still preserved and shown to visitors at Mount St. Agnes, and on which was written his favourite motto, half Latin, half Dutch : *In omnibus requiem quæsi, sed non inveni, nisi in Hoexkens ende Boexkens*—'In all things have I sought rest, but have found it not, except in little nooks and little books.' This inscription so well expresses the habits and the character of à Kempis, especially towards the end of his life, that it is found on almost all the subsequent portraits of the saintly religious.

But though he loved the quiet of his cell so dearly, still, in the times of the common recreation he would mingle with the Brethren, affable and kind towards all, respected and beloved by all, yet for the most part recollected and silent, uttering not a word so long as the conversation turned on subjects of merely mundane interest, even when requested finding it difficult to express an opinion on such matters, but readily pouring forth a limpid torrent of thoughts and words when asked to speak of God or the things of heaven. And then, feeling the fire of Divine love enkindled within him, and doubtless fearing he should betray by his emotion the spiritual sweetness where-with his soul was inundated, 'My brethren,' he would say, 'I must go ; for there is someone waiting

to converse with me in my cell.* The Canons knew well the reason of his hasty departure, and willingly accepting his excuse, gazed after his venerable form with mingled love and reverence as he made his way to the privacy of his chamber, there to abandon himself without reserve to the caresses of his heavenly Spouse.

Yet our Venerable Thomas did not allow the sweets of contemplation and intimate union with his Beloved to interfere with his attendance at the Community offices, or even with his ordinary occupation of composing little spiritual treatises. Quite recently a codex of his was discovered in the Burgoyne Library at Brussels which was completed as late as A.D. 1456, and what other works he may have written about this time we cannot tell. However, we are certain that he continued to keep the Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes until the very year of his death.

And therein, indeed, we find no trace of the lassitude and indifference that so often accompany old age. Every incident of note and interest to the Priory is carefully recorded, with all its details. Seasons of extraordinary cold or heat are mentioned, together with the consequences to the community and the surrounding peasantry. Whenever a calamity, public or private, is narrated, the aged Chronicler usually adds an item to show how Divine Providence, afflicting with one hand, healed with the other, by granting a blessing equal to, or greater than, the loss sustained. Or else he interposes some such remark as this: 'Truly this is the loving and merciful rod of God upon the Christian people, lest,

* 'Vita Thomas à Kempis,' per Jodocum Badium, c. xii., 4.

inhabiting this world too long, they should prefer it to the kingdom above.’*

The clothing also of each new Religious is diligently noted, with the date of the ceremony, the name, birthplace, and sometimes individual qualities of the postulant. The successive migrations, too, of the Brethren to a better land are lovingly chronicled, and many an edifying story is told to illustrate the virtues of the departed religious. Here is an incident that recalls the faith and devotion of the early days at Deventer.

Speaking of one Gerard Humbolt, an Oblate Brother, who died in the year 1459, Thomas informs us that at one time he had diligently discharged the duties of hosteller, and that on one occasion during his term of office a great number of guests had arrived, and he had bidden the cook prepare what was necessary. ‘And he began to be troubled because of the unusual influx of visitors, fearing that he would not be able to provide for them all as he would willingly have done. To whom Gerard Humbolt, trusting in the Lord, said: “Make the sign of the cross over the vegetables and the food which you have cooked and God will give a blessing and sufficiency.” The cook did as he said, and with confidence blessed it again and again. And lo! the loving Lord, seeing their faith, gave increase so that all had sufficient. And when dinner was finished much remained over, so that what was left sufficed for a full meal at supper.’†

À Kempis also records to the honour of the same Gerard Humbolt that ‘he was zealous and devout in the service of God, and especially in those things

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 118.

† *Ibid.*, p. 120.

which pertained to the praise and honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary. With great devotion, and with a pious intention for the adornment of our church and to the glory of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Agnes, he procured a beautiful statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, ornamented with gold, and a corona of bright brass containing many lamps, and certain other decorations around the altar of the Blessed Virgin.*

Here, again, we find our Venerable Thomas appreciating and praising in another the very characteristics for which he himself was noted; for Tolensis records of him that he was most zealous in working for anything that might add to the beauty and splendour of the temple of God.

The reader will also remark that à Kempis speaks of the ornaments placed in the church by Humbolt as contributing to the glory of St. Agnes. The same thought occurs in the following item, which was entered A.D. 1460: 'At the same time our church was fitly adorned with beautiful colours on the roof and on the panels of the walls, to the glory of God and the honour of St. Agnes, the patroness of our church, and out of devotion these three names, "Jesus, Maria, Agnes," were painted in large black lettering on a white background, so that they are quite plain to the eyes of all who enter the church.'†

The truth is that the holy Canon never forgot that the youthful virgin martyr of Rome was the principal patroness of the church and monastery, in which he passed so many happy years. For this reason, and also because of her own beautiful character, he entertained

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 120.

† *Ibid.*, p. 121.



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for the child Saint the most tender reverence and devotion. This devotion he strove to instil into others, and especially the novices entrusted to his care. Two sermons of his delivered on her feast are still extant, and therein he treats of the virtues and glories of St. Agnes under the figure of three beautiful garments and of a golden crown. From these and from the two hymns he composed in her honour, we learn that besides the purity of which St. Agnes has ever been regarded as the emblem, the special charm which the young Roman maiden possessed for our Venerable à Kempis was her utter detachment from the world and her loving fidelity to Christ, her Divine Spouse.

At the end of these two sermons to the novices Thomas gives as 'examples' seven instances in which individuals of the community, or the whole monastery, had benefited by the protection of their holy patroness. In five of these cases the help of St. Agnes had been fervently implored; but in the last two, the deliverance from a dangerous fire and the recovery of a stolen horse, no special petition had been addressed to her. And hence we conclude that the good Canons, and especially à Kempis, were wont to attribute to the intercession of the girl martyr any notable marks they received of the favour of Heaven. In fact, the Venerable Sub-prior confesses as much at the conclusion of the last 'example.' 'O most blessed Agnes, ever worthy of honour,' he exclaims, 'this benefit we ascribe to thy merits, for we have experienced thy protection in many of our necessities. And, therefore, we praise Christ in thee, and devoutly invoke and glorify thee; always giving thanks to God for all

the favours which He has mercifully bestowed upon us. Amen.*

Hence it was with great joy that he and his brother-religious received in A.D. 1461 a chest in which some relics of St. Agnes had been preserved for three hundred and fifty years. These relics consisted most probably of a part of her skull, for the rest of the remains had never been removed from her tomb in the Nomentan Basilica. In the first of the 'examples' of which we have just been speaking Thomas tells a story of one of the Brethren who was subject to frequent headaches, and who was on that account frequently obliged to absent himself from choir. 'But he had a special devotion to the venerable virgin St. Agnes, our patroness, who is so rich in tender compassion. He desired, therefore, with great longing to visit her sacred relics in Utrecht, which are honourably preserved there in a silver casket, covered with gold, in the cathedral church of St. Martin. And it so happened that he went with his Prior to visit that holy place, and entering the cathedral, which is richly adorned with the relics of many saints, he begged the custodian to show him the reliquary of Blessed Agnes, which he had so long devoutly wished to see. Then the custodian of the holy relics replied: 'It is difficult for me to obtain permission to open the precious casket of St. Agnes, but I will willingly show you the ancient reliquary of the holy virgin, in which her relics long reposed to the praise and glory of God.' On hearing this the Brother was filled with consolation, and awaited in joyous expectancy to see the venerable casket. And when he had seen it and

* 'Serm. ad Novit,' Pars tertia, viii., n. 25.

it had been opened, reverently bowing and kissing the chest, he placed his head within it, confidently expecting to obtain relief from his sufferings through the merits of St. Agnes. After this he returned most fervent thanks to God and the holy virgin Agnes that he had been permitted to behold these things with his own eyes. And henceforth from this time not only was his body freed from its former malady, but his soul also received the grace of greater devotion; and he terminated well the course of his life by a joyous and happy death in great fervour of spirit.*

In this incident we find mention of two reliquaries of St. Agnes, a precious casket of silver and gold, and an ancient coffer in which the relics had formerly rested. It was this latter that was presented to the priory at Agnetenberg, A.D. 1461. Thomas describes the happy event in the twenty-eighth chapter of his Chronicle. He tells us that as far back as A.D. 1413 the Dean of St. Martin's had transferred the relics of the youthful martyr from the ancient wooden chest bound with plates of brass and gold, in which they had lain for so many years, into a new and beautifully wrought ark of silver overlaid with gold. But the good Canons on the Mount possessed no relics of the patroness to whom they were so devout, nor was it an easy matter to obtain such a treasure. Perhaps, however, the Chapter of the Cathedral at Utrecht would bestow upon them at least that ancient reliquary, which was sanctified by the presence of her holy remains for more than three centuries.

They presented their petition accordingly, and after

* *Serm. ad Novit, Pars tertia, viii., n. 19.*

a long delay and after many friends had employed their influence in the matter, to the great joy of the whole Community their humble request was granted. Two of the Brethren—‘consecrated priests’ Thomas remarks, to note their veneration for the holy reliquary—were sent to Utrecht, and after a few days they returned with the coveted treasure. ‘Hearing this, our Brethren and all our lay domestics rejoiced exceedingly. And with great devotion and reverence the ark was carried to the church and placed in the sanctuary, near the high altar, under the arch of the north wall.’*

This must have been an occasion of great joy to the aged à Kempis, who was now in his eighty-second year. He had seen the monastery he loved so dearly rise gradually from its lowliness and poverty to a state of considerable prosperity and importance. He could look back with pleasure on those early days when, while his brother John was busy directing and encouraging the labourers by word and example, he was sitting in his cell industriously transcribing the manuscripts the sale of which would gain for them their daily bread. He could also look back on the foundation and building of the church, its gradual completion and then its consecration, and his ordination in the same year, possibly at the same time; and then as the years rolled on and their numbers and their funds increased, the addition of altars to meet their growing wants, and the adornment of the church in a manner sufficient to satisfy their loving devotion. And now, as it were to crown the progress of all those years, they were possessed of a sacred reliquary of

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ pp. 123, 125.

that sweet youthful Saint under whose auspices they had so long worked and prayed, their holy patroness, the virgin martyr Agnes.

But in addition to this love for St. Agnes, their principal patroness, the Canons on the Mount entertained a special reverence for those other holy confessors, martyrs and virgins, in whose honour they had dedicated the different altars in their church. Our Venerable à Kempis, who is, as it were, the exponent of their spirit, and who doubtless did much to foster this devotion among them, makes frequent mention of these saints in his works, and never fails to record the love of a departed Brother for this or that particular patron. He also composed several hymns and prayers to these saints, and in one of these, which he entitles 'A Canticle to Jesus and Mary, and all the Patrons of our Church,' he devotes a verse to describing the merits and glory, and imploring the aid, of each in succession.

Moreover, we find from his writings that the holy Canon entertained a special devotion for his own name-Saint, St. Thomas the Apostle. Among the 'Piæ Orationes' at the end of the third volume of his works are placed two prayers and three collects, the former addressed to the Apostle himself, the latter imploring graces from God through his merits. The second of the prayers begins in this fashion :

'O my most sublime, venerable, and ever lovable patron, St. Thomas, Apostle of Christ and chosen disciple of Jesus, with longing desire I pour forth my supplications to thee, and by the daily service of my lips I implore thy glorious intercession. Make my prayers acceptable to thee, and show thyself

loving to me ; so that thy praise may never cease from my mouth, but may be renewed from day to day with fresh accession of love. May my mind be fervent in prayer, and in my meditation may the fire of Divine love be enkindled, and may my heart and soul be filled with sweet jubilation in venerating thy holy name. For thou art the chosen disciple of Jesus and my beloved Apostle, whom I have taken to myself for my special patron and advocate, to whose custody I have entrusted my soul, and to whose protection I confidently and devoutly commit my whole life. Thou art most powerful with the King of glory. Therefore, I beseech thee, be mindful of me, a sinner, and propitiate towards me the countenance of my most compassionate Creator.’*

À Kempis then proceeds to commemorate in his prayer the life and work of his holy patron. His words and actions before the dispersion of the Apostles he describes by skilfully bringing together all that can be learnt concerning him from the Gospel narratives, and he dwells with rapture on the invitation given to Thomas by the risen Saviour to touch His glorified wounds. He then recounts his apostolate in India, and here he represents him as meeting with the three magi who, guided by the star from the east, had come to adore the new-born Christ, and as instructing and baptizing them, ordaining them to the priesthood, and afterwards consecrating them Bishops. Finally, he congratulates his patron on the glory and happiness which he now enjoys in heaven, and concludes his beautiful prayer with these words :

‘ Hail, Thomas, glorious and ever venerable Apostle,

* ‘ *Orationes Piæ*,’ viii.

obtain grace for thy servants, and at the coming of the just Judge stand faithfully by them when they are to be tried, and obtain for them the intercession of the tender Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, the fruit of whose womb be blessed for ever. Amen.’*

This conclusion is eminently characteristic of à Kempis. In every prayer, in every discourse, in every treatise, he finds room and occasion for a loving mention of the Divine Mother and her Son. Jesus and Mary were to him all in all. His love for them was inexpressibly tender and devout. Their sweet names were ever on his lips, they were ever his refuge, his consolation. ‘All bitter things become sweet,’ he says, ‘and all our burdens are lightened, when the love of Jesus and the memory of His holy Mother penetrate to the interior of the heart. If any-one wishes to prove this, let him frequently think of them, speak of them, read of them, sing of them, pray to them.’†

In another place he says: ‘If you wish to be consoled in every tribulation, approach to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, standing near the Cross, weeping and sorrowing; and all your burdens will speedily either vanish, or become more bearable. Choose this most benign Mother of Jesus in preference to all relations and friends, as your special Mother and advocate before death, and frequently greet her with the angelic salutation, for she exceedingly loves to hear this prayer. If the malignant enemy tempt you, and hinder you from the praise of God and of Mary, heed him not, nor cease to praise and pray; but invoke

* ‘*Orationes Piæ*,’ viii.

† ‘*Serm. ad Novit.*,’ *Pars tertia*, vi.

Mary more fervently still. Salute Mary, think of Mary, name Mary, honour Mary, always glorify Mary. Bow to Mary, commend yourself to Mary. With Mary remain in your cell, with Mary keep silence, with Mary rejoice, with Mary sorrow. With Mary labour, with Mary watch, with Mary pray, with Mary walk, with Mary rest. With Mary seek Jesus, with Mary carry Jesus, with Mary and Jesus dwell in Nazareth. With Mary go to Jerusalem, with Mary stand by the Cross of Jesus, with Mary mourn for Jesus, with Mary bury Jesus. With Mary and Jesus rise, with Mary and Jesus ascend to heaven, with Mary and Jesus desire to live and die.*

I have already remarked on the habit of à Kempis of relating edifying little incidents which had befallen himself as happening to a third person. At the conclusion from which we have taken the above extract the Venerable Canon gives several examples of the prompt assistance afforded by our Lady to those who call upon her holy name. The first of these concerns a certain Brother who, having lost a book, found it again, after several times repeating the 'Hail Mary.' Badius Ascensius assures us that this Brother was none other than à Kempis himself. I will give the story here in all its touching simplicity, to show the childlike confidence Thomas possessed in Mary.

'A certain Brother lost a little book in his cell, and, after anxiously seeking it for some time, was unable to find it. And becoming sad at this loss and despairing of finding the book, he turned himself to pray, and called upon the Blessed Virgin in the angelic salutation. When, therefore, according to his custom,

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars tertia, ii.

he had begun to recite the "Hail Mary," and had often repeated the same, thinking sorrowfully the while of his book, suddenly, as he sat near his couch praying before a picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary, this inspiration came to his mind: "Seek here before you under the straw of the bed." At once he stretched out his hand to the head of his bed, wishing to see whether anything were lying hidden there, and lo! lifting up the mattress a little, he soon touched the book with his hand and drew it forth. And seeing it he wondered, and kissing the book in his joy, he gave thanks to God, and immediately paid to the Blessed Virgin the "Hail Marys" which he had promised her. And he said: "Perhaps our Lady wanted to have some 'Hail Marys,' and, therefore, you could not so speedily find the book." It is good, therefore, often to recite the "Hail Mary," and devoutly to call upon the Mother of Jesus.*

But if such were his love for Mary, what shall we say of his love for her Divine Son? At the very opening of the 'Imitation' we find the words: 'Let it be our chief study to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ.' This sentence strikes the keynote of the whole religious life of the Venerable à Kempis. The life of our Saviour from the crib to the Cross, and from the sepulchre to the hill of Galilee, whence He ascended to His eternal Father, formed the subject of his daily meditation, prayer and discourse. If silence and solitude were dear to him, it was only because he was thereby brought nearer to Jesus. If he loved poverty, humility, patience, suffering, subjection, it was only because thereby he was rendered more like

* 'Serm. ad Novit.,' Pars tertia, ii.

to Jesus. If he hated the world and avoided its pleasures, and was unwilling to recreate himself with licit amusement, it was only because these things would tend to separate him from Jesus. If he lovingly complained of the burden of the flesh and of the delay of death, and ardently longed for his release, and sighed for the day of his departure, it was only because his love could never rest, nor ever be fully satiated, until it had drunk of the torrents of delights wherewith only those are inebriated that have passed the border-line and entered into their everlasting reward.

Again and again throughout his writings this consuming desire for the perfect union of the Blessed finds expression in words of tenderest longing and love. 'Come, Lord Jesus,' he cries, 'come and delay not. Waiting I have awaited Thee; hearken to me and hear me. Leave me not longer in the world. Let it suffice that I have thus far striven, that I have been exiled so long and have not yet merited to enjoy Thee, nor been able to contemplate Thee face to face. Now grant me to possess the joy which I have desired, the joy which is bounded by no limit, which is never overshadowed by weariness. Show me Thy face, upon which the angels ever gaze; let Thy voice, which they hear unceasingly, sound in my ears.

'Come, Lord Jesus, and take me from this land of strangers. Come, good Saviour, make me participate in Thy eternal glory. It is time that I return to Thee. It is time that Thou commend my body to the earth, from which it has been taken. It matters not much where it be placed, or how it be treated, if only my soul be saved and come to Thee. Let my spirit,

which I commend to Thee, be happy ; and let my flesh rest in hope, to be resuscitated on the last day. For wherever it be placed it cannot be far from Thee, or hidden from Thy view.

‘Receive me from the company of men, and join me to the society of Thy Saints. I am weary of this temporal life ; only the day of eternal brightness cheers me. . . . Receive me in glory, in mercy and in Thy goodness, for with desire I have desired to eat the Pasch with Thee. O happy day of my desired reward ! O blessed hour of happy transit, how long have I desired thee, and how have I ever kept thee before my eyes ! What harm now have tribulations and anguish in the world brought me ? What loss have labour, and contempt, and humiliations borne for Thy Name’s sake, caused me ? To me to live was Christ, and now to die will be gain, and still greater gain it will be to live with Thee in Thy kingdom for ever.’*

At length, after many years of patient longing and waiting, the fulness of time approached, and Thomas felt the assurance that the end was near. Towards his ninetieth year he became afflicted with dropsy. Yet, even then, although he knew that he would soon be in a better, happier world, in that heaven for which he so ardently longed, and whose beauties none could more feelingly describe, he ceased not to take an active part in the concerns and interests of his beloved priory. This is clearly evidenced by the minuteness and diligence with which he continued to jot down the entries of his Chronicle.

Take, for instance, the year 1467, just four years

* ‘Solil. Animæ,’ c. vii.

before his holy death, the eighty-eighth year of his age. Under this date he records the clothing of a novice, the successive migrations of five of the Community, each with the accustomed little biography, and four other items, of which I will give three here in full.

‘In the same year the Brethren and the monastery in Windesheim rebuilt and enlarged their ancient church to the honour of God.

‘In the same year, after Pentecost, our Father George built a new kitchen to take the place of the old one, which was roofed with reeds and straw, and made it stronger, to avoid the danger of fire, and larger, to adapt it to the needs of the house.

‘In the same year, on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15), our most beloved Father George took from the altar with all reverence the ciborium of the Venerable Sacrament, and went with the Community round the cloister in procession chanting the responses *Felix namque*. And after they had returned to the choir, kneeling before the Venerable Sacrament placed on the altar, they sang the antiphon *Media via*, with its versicles and collect. And this was done to ward off from us the plague, which had then commenced to rage here and in many other places.’*

I may notice here, before passing on, that the devotion of the good Prior and his Canons seems to have been duly rewarded; for though during each of the few remaining years that à Kempis was chronicler death claimed its victims from among the numerous Community on the Mount, we do not read of a single

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ pp. 132, 133.

religious dying of the plague, which they had implored God's mercy to avert.

Taking now the very year before his death, we find two entries of some length. In the first our Venerable Thomas records the admission of three novices, two clerics and a lay Brother, and gives full particulars of each. He also remarks in this item that they were not clothed on a feast day, but on a Feria, 'in order to avoid the tumult of men and a concourse of secular friends.'* And this we may regard as evidence that the citizens of the neighbouring town of Zwolle took a lively interest in the affairs of the priory on the Mount, and that the house which in its humble origin they had so fiercely opposed was now become a monastery of considerable importance in their little world.

The other entry I will give as it stands, partly to show the care with which à Kempis still noted every interesting detail, and partly, as will be seen from the sequel, because of the importance of the information it contained in determining the site of Thomas's grave: 'In the same year (1470), and the day after the Feast of St. Maurice and his companions, martyrs (September 22), just after Matins had begun, our Brother Peter Herbort, a deacon, died at the age of sixty-five. He was a man small of stature and of a very weak constitution, and therefore unable to observe many of the statutes of the order. Nevertheless, he frequently received the discipline in Chapter for his shortcomings, often washed the heads of the Brethren at the time of shaving the tonsures, and willingly read for others in the refectory. At

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 135.

length, after completing forty-three years in the habit of the order of Regulars, at the end of his course, contrite, confessed, communicated, and anointed, he slept in the Lord in a good conscience and faith amidst the prayers of his Brethren, our Father George being present with many of the Community, the others remaining in choir to chant Matins and Lauds. After dinner, prayers for the departed were sung for him and for others our benefactors, and he was buried in the eastern cloister by the side of our Brother Gerard Cortbeen.’*

And now we come to the last item written in the Chronicle by à Kempis, entered by him a few months before his death. A melancholy interest attaches to these words, the last of all his writings still extant, perhaps the last words he ever penned :

‘In the year of the Lord 1471, on the Feast, namely, of St. Anthony, Confessor (January 17), in the morning during High Mass, a devout laic, John Gerlac, a native of Dese, near Zwolle, died at the age of nearly seventy-two. Having dwelt with us for more than fifty-three years, he endured here much toil and poverty in great humility, simplicity, and patience. But, among other virtues which he possessed, he was especially remarkable for his habitual taciturnity. During the whole day he would speak but very little, even when employed in manual labour, giving to others an example of silence. A short time before his death he was seized with apoplexy, and became somewhat delirious. He was buried in our cemetery with the other laics.’†

* ‘Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 135.

† *Ibid.*, p. 136.

After this there is a break in the Chronicle, and then the following notice in an unknown hand :

‘ Thus far Thomas à Kempis ; the rest was continued by another.’*

The first entry penned by the new chronicler concerns Thomas himself, gives us all the certain details we possess of his death, and contains a most valuable testimony to his life and virtues, written as it is by one who must have known him intimately, and who, in composing this simple panegyric, was but expressing the sentiments of the whole community of Mount St. Agnes. Here are his words in full :

‘ In the same year (1471), on the Feast of St. James the Less, after Compline, our dearly-beloved Brother Thomas Haemerken, of Kempen, a town in the diocese of Cologne, departed this life in the ninety-second year of his age, the sixty-third year of his clothing, the fifty-eighth year of his priesthood. In his youth he was a disciple of Master Florence at Deventer, and by him he was sent in his twentieth year to his brother-german, at that time Prior of Mount St. Agnes, by whom he was clothed after six years of probation. And he endured from the time of the foundation of our monastery great poverty, trials, and labours. He copied out our whole Bible and many other books for the use of the house and for sale. Moreover, he composed various treatises for the edification of youth, unadorned and simple in style, but truly great in thought and efficacy. He was filled with a loving devotion towards the Passion of our Lord, and possessed a wonderful gift of consoling the tempted and the afflicted. At length, in his old

* ‘ Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,’ p. 137.

days, after suffering from dropsy of the limbs, he fell asleep in the Lord, and was buried in the eastern cloister by the side of Brother Peter Herbort.*

At the peaceful close, then, of a long summer's day, when all the daily duties were accomplished, after the last canonical hour had been chanted—a time truly appropriate to end the long, laborious, and fruitful day of his holy life, surrounded by all the community—for just then there was no special office to keep any of the Brethren away—the aged and saintly Canon, the pillar of the house, the one connecting-link with the past, the last surviving representative of all that was best and holiest in the great movement of the New Devotion and in its double offspring, the Brotherhood of the Common Life and the Congregation of the Regulars of Windesheim, he whom succeeding generations have unanimously honoured with the title of 'Venerable,' tranquilly breathed forth his spirit and passed to his reward—yea, passed at once to his reward, passed at once

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 137. It is to be regretted that this little passage is not free from errors—errors, no doubt, due to the transcriber. The first is that the duration of à Kempis's religious life is put at sixty-three years, whereas, since he was clothed in A.D. 1406, he was sixty-five years a religious. I also suspect that the date given for his death is another clerical slip. The Feast of St. James the Less is nowhere else found in the writings of the Windesheimers: it is always mentioned as the Feast of SS. James and Philip; for these two Apostles are commemorated on the same day, May 1. But the Feast of St. James the Greater falls on July 25, the date usually assigned for Thomas's death. The corruption of 'minoris' into 'majoris' might easily occur in the days when printing had not yet become widespread.

to that heavenly Fatherland for which he had so long sighed, to that 'New Jerusalem, established in perpetual peace, crowned with glory and honour, and perfect in the fulness of all good things. . . . Where God is seen face to face clearly and without a veil, not by moments nor by hours, but fully and without end. Where is known the blessed and glorious Trinity and inseparable Unity, which is adored and praised and blessed by all the citizens of heaven. Where is the only-beloved, the choicest of all, more precious than all wealth, the longed-for treasure, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church, immortal, in Whom are all the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, hidden from the world, but manifest to the elect.

'Where is the most glorious Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, adorning the whole celestial court with her presence and beauty, whom troops of maidens surround and accompany as flowers of roses and lilies of the valley. Where are angels and arch-angels, arranged in their orders, joyfully intent upon the Divine praises. . . .

'Where are the patriarchs and prophets, who, once filled with the Holy Ghost, foresaw of the coming of Christ, and who now know the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the King of kings, true God, and bless Him with unceasing praise. Where are the illustrious and most venerable preachers of Christ, the Apostles and disciples of our Lord, full of holiness and grace, the founders of the Catholic Faith, but now amid eternal glory the devout advocates of those whom they have begotten and instructed in the Faith.

'Where is especially resplendent the Baptist of

Christ, John, the chosen friend of the Bridegroom. Where is Peter, the heavenly key-bearer, Paul, the illustrious Doctor, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, James, and John, with the other Apostles and Evangelists, pillars of the Church. . . .

‘Where are the noble martyrs empurpled in their own blood, blessed for ever with Christ. . . . Where are the illustrious confessors, who, despising the life of the world, have been found worthy of the life of heaven. Where are the great and glorious Doctors, absorbed in deeper contemplation of God in proportion to the merits of their holy life, many of whom have left in their writings the living reflection of their sanctity. Where are young men and maidens, the old with the younger, constantly praising the name of the Lord, and attributing to the Divine Majesty whatever good or virtuous action they have performed; always grateful, always devout, always happy, and always inflamed, nor ever oppressed with weariness, but always uplifted in the endless contemplation of God.’*

* ‘Solil. Animæ,’ c. xxi.

CHAPTER XV

Subsequent history of Mount St. Agnes—The discovery and translation of the relics of à Kempis—The monument in which they are now enshrined—The question of his canonization



HE little that remains of the story of à Kempis is soon told.

Less than a century after the holy Canon's death the peaceful cloistral home in which the greater part of his saintly life had been spent was made to feel the full force of the political and religious storm raging throughout Europe in consequence of the writings and teachings of Luther and his followers.

The discontented Netherlanders eagerly drank in the new doctrine that Christians should be subject to no sovereign authority whatever, and the vigorous efforts made by the Spaniards under Charles V. and his son and successor, Philip II., utterly failed to avert those evils which the so-called Reformers had brought upon Germany in the disasters of the Peasants' War. The Protestants, chiefly Calvinists and Anabaptists, rose in arms all over the country, pillaged the churches and convents, and committed everywhere the wildest excesses.

Warned by the fate of so many of their Brethren, and already subjected to continual annoyance at the

hands of the fanatics, the Canons of Mount St. Agnes applied to Pope Paul IV., A.D. 1559, for permission to retire from the priory, and take up their abode in more peaceful surroundings. Paul IV. acceded to their request, and his decision was ratified by his successor, Pius IV., who gave the Canons the choice of emigrating to another house of their own order, or of remaining on the Mount dispensed from the observances of their religious profession, from the vow of poverty, and from the obligation of wearing the habit, A.D. 1561. The monastery, with its property and revenues, was then transferred to the new See of Deventer, and the Chapel of St. Agnes became a parish church.

This state of things, however, was not destined to continue long. The first Bishop nominated to the newly-created diocese, a Friar Minor named John Mahus, was never even consecrated. So violent was the persecution raised against him that he resigned his claim, and retired into private life in the town of Aldenard. But even here he was not secure; for the place was taken by the heretics in the year 1572, and the good friar was seized and almost kicked to death.

On the resignation of Mahus, another friar, Ægidius, had been elected to fill the vacant see. At his demise, in 1577, three Vicars-General were successively appointed by the Cathedral Chapter at Deventer. Under the third, A.D. 1591, the city and its see passed into the possession of the States, and the public celebration of the Catholic worship was suppressed.*

* Zunggo, ii., 8.

Even before this date the few Canons left on the Mount to administer to the spiritual needs of the faithful in the neighbourhood had been dispersed, while the lands and the tithes of the priory had been assigned to the Fiscus of Overysse. Soon afterwards the whole establishment was demolished in one of those outbursts of fanatical fury so common in those unhappy times, and not a stone was left standing upon a stone. Yet the halo of its former glory did not immediately die away. As late as the seventeenth century, according to Rosweyd, Agnetenberg was commonly known as 'the Miracle-Mount,' on account of the frequent prodigies formerly wrought there at the intercession of St. Agnes, and Catholics were still accustomed to make pilgrimages to the place barefooted in honour of the youthful virgin martyr, and also in memory of the Venerable à Kempis.

Then, in the latter half of this same seventeenth century, the clouds that overhung the holy spot and all the Netherlands lifted for a moment, and the hearts of Catholics beat high with the hope that a brighter day was dawning. In the year 1672 Louis XIV. entered the Lowlands by the Rhine and the Meuse with an army of over a hundred thousand men. He soon obtained possession of the provinces of Gelderland, Utrecht, and Overysse, and more than forty garrisoned towns capitulated to his arms. Among these latter was the city of Zwolle, which fell into the hands of his ally, Maximilian Hendrik, Elector, or Prince-Bishop of Cologne.

Almost the first act of the Elector after his triumphal entry was to order search to be made for the relics of

the Venerable à Kempis. From the Chronicle of St. Agnes it was known that the holy Canon had been buried in the eastern cloister, and the parish priest of Zwolle, Arnold Waeyer, added the information, obtained from his predecessor, Volquerus Herkinge, that his grave was exactly seven feet from the choir door. Nearly three weeks were employed in clearing away the débris and digging the grave. At length, as they were approaching the site where, according to tradition, the body should be lying, Arnold Waeyer exclaimed: 'If you do not find his relics here, you need search no farther!' And, in effect, after a little more labour, they found the skeleton in the very spot he had indicated.

The holy remains were found in a state of wonderful preservation. The head was resting upon two pieces of turf, with a slight inclination to the right side. The teeth were still white, and filled the upper jaw; but on being touched, two or three fell from their sockets. The hands were crossed, the right over the left. The bones of the fingers and toes were entire; but the ribs and the shoulder-blades and the right side of the head had decayed. A part of his stole still remained incorrupt; but all the other priestly vestments had long since crumbled to dust. To the great awe and admiration of all, a beautiful bunch of flowers, white, red, and yellow, was found growing on the inner side of the left ankle at a depth of ten feet in the sandy soil.

Every indication tended to prove the fact that these were indeed the relics of the Venerable à Kempis, and of no other. In the first place, they were found in the exact position which tradition had assigned to them.

Pastoor Waeyer measured the distance himself, and found that there was not a hair-breadth more or less. Moreover, many marks of honour surrounded these remains, as those of one much venerated and loved. Three only were buried in the eastern cloister where his body lay. Thomas, as the most worthy, was placed nearest the altar, and no other was afterwards allowed to fill the intervening space between him and the door of the choir. His was the only grave that was found to be cemented; evidently the Brethren had desired to preserve the holy remains incorrupt as long as they could. The material of his stole was white satin embroidered with flowers, while that of the priest buried near him was of a comparatively coarse and common texture.

Of the other two buried in the same cloister, we have the names and characters as given by Thomas himself in the Chronicle. The one by whom he was laid was the deacon, Peter Herbort, a man, as the reader will remember, of small stature and weak constitution, unable to endure the austerities of the Regular life. The marks of his grave were indeed visible, but no remains were to be seen. Evidently they had speedily crumbled away, as was to be expected in the case of a man so feeble. But the Brother buried on the further side of Herbort, a priest named Gerard Cortbeen, was a strong man, inured to hard toil.* Accordingly, in his grave they found the remnants of a stole, the sign of his priesthood, and the skeleton of one who had evidently been a large and powerfully-built man.

The skeleton of à Kempis himself Pastoor Waeyer

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' p. 134.

describes as that of a man below the middle height—namely, ‘three inches less than six feet’; but, as Sir Francis Cruise well explains, the Dutch foot of the seventeenth century was considerably less than its English equivalent of to-day. From his own observations on the relics, this eminent physician was led to the conclusion that the stature of our Venerable Thomas was slightly over five feet six inches.*

As a final link in the chain of evidence in favour of the genuineness of these remains, the cranium was found to closely resemble the head in the authentic portrait of à Kempis, at that time possessed by the good Pastoor, and still preserved at Zwolle.

Two hundred and one years, then, after his interment the skeleton of the Venerable à Kempis was discovered almost entire, with the bones still attached and in their natural position. The intention in thus exhuming them was to transfer them to some more honourable resting-place than the unknown grave amidst the desolation of the ruined church and priory. Accordingly, on August 13, A.D. 1672, in the presence of Dr. Henry Meringh, a Canon of Cologne and the Commissary of Maximilian, Pastoor Waeyer and the Governor of Zwolle, the skeleton was dismembered by two Canons Regular, Francis Corlui and Gaspar Everard Shriek. The bones were then reverently taken from the grave, wrapped in linen, sealed with the seal of the city of Zwolle, and conveyed to the town in a carriage drawn by six horses.

The Elector thereupon instructed his Commissary to entrust the holy remains to Arnold Waeyer, with orders to place them in the sacristy of the Church of

* ‘Thomas à Kempis,’ Appendix E.

St. Joseph, in the Spiegel Steeg, and with strict injunctions not to part with them on any conditions. The Prince-Bishop also gave instructions for the execution of a handsome reliquary. This was completed two years later, and therein the relics were carefully deposited on June 29, A.D. 1674, and there they remain to this day. As his own share in this treasure-trove, Maximilian reserved part of the embroidered stole which had been found round the neck of the Venerable Canon. Two large stones were placed to mark the head and the foot of the grave from which the relics had been taken; but these have long since disappeared, and now it is impossible to indicate the spot where the body of à Kempis reposed.

Pastoor Waeyer was most faithful to his trust. No argument or solicitation could induce him to relinquish his custody of the holy remains, or even to divide them and present portions to this one or that. His successors, however, were not so careful. In A.D. 1830 it was found that of the skeleton itself the bones of the left side only were remaining. In A.D. 1847 the parish priest, Pastoor Tempelman, made a present of the lower jaw to the famous Benedictine, Dom, afterwards Cardinal, Pitra. At present there are in the reliquary the skull, the hip-bone, and several other large bones; also several smaller bones, some gravel from the grave, stems of the flowers found growing on the ankle, some moth-eaten linen and half-moulded relics, and some of the turf on which the head had rested. These latter are collected in different groups and placed in separate little boxes, each with a note descriptive of its contents.

In the year 1809 the Church of St. Joseph was de-

molished on account of its ruinous condition, and the reliquary was then conveyed to the Church of St. Michael in the Nieu-Straat. In A.D. 1892 a new church dedicated to St. Michael was built, and to the sacristy of that church the relics were again transferred.

It was, however, felt by all that the holy remains were worthy of a more honourable resting-place than the shelf of a sacristy, lying in a chest which, though of costly workmanship and material, had grown dingy and dusty with age and exposure. Many a lover of à Kempis and the 'Imitation' expressed his regret that no monument had been erected to the saintly Canon's name, and his willingness to do something towards this desirable end.

At last one was found possessed of more energy or opportunities than the rest, and the speedy and marked success that crowned his efforts proved that everyone had only been waiting for someone to give the signal and take the lead. In A.D. 1890 the Very Rev. L. B. Mulder, Canon of the Metropolitan Chapter of Utrecht, Dean of Heerenveen, and parish priest of Wolvega, formed a committee to consider the project of erecting a suitable monument in Zwolle, or the vicinity, in honour of the Venerable à Kempis.

In the November of the same year the committee issued a manifesto, stating its purpose and soliciting the necessary contributions. So prompt and generous was the answer to this appeal that the committee found itself able to do much more than had been originally intended, and accordingly a new programme was drawn up in the July of 1894. A few months later it was resolved to extend the appeal to foreign

countries also, not because Holland could not supply the necessary funds, but in order that the monument might be an international tribute of reverence and love to the author of the world-read 'Imitation.'

This monument, it was now determined, should be placed in the south aisle of the Church of St. Michael. Its lower part was to consist of a sarcophagus containing the relics; in its upper portion it was to represent Thomas kneeling before the Christ carrying His Cross, and addressing to His faithful servant the words: 'He who follows Me walketh not in darkness.' The work was to be executed in the Dutch style of the fifteenth century, and to be carved of the best and most beautiful white marble. The cost was not to exceed 10,000 florins; but this figure was exclusive of mural decorations and the expenses of scaffolding, etc. A prize of 1,000 florins was, moreover, offered for the best design submitted, and 500 for the second best.

By January 15, 1895, eighteen designs had been sent in, coming from Belgium, Italy, Germany, and England. A jury was formed, and on February 11 a verdict was given in favour of the design entitled 'St. Joseph II.' On opening the letter enclosed, it was discovered that this was the work of F. W. Mengelberg, of Utrecht, and to him, accordingly, the erection of the monument was entrusted. The work progressed with great rapidity, and towards the end of 1897 all was ready for the solemn opening.

November 10 was the day appointed for the ceremony. His Lordship, the Archbishop of Utrecht, Mgr. H. Van de Wetering, and many others of high rank in Church and State were present. A document

was read in Latin and Dutch declaring the genuineness of the relics, and after this had been signed and sealed by the Archbishop, it was placed in the ancient reliquary of Maximilian, which was again sealed and deposited in the sarcophagus.

Then the veil fell, and the monument stood out in all its beauty.

The lower part of the structure consists of heavy, beautifully-worked black marble. Two steps from the ground is a marble sarcophagus, in which, behind an exquisitely wrought iron grating, may be seen the famous reliquary of Maximilian, now splendidly restored and plated with gold. Round the border of the sarcophagus runs the inscription: 'Honor, non memoriæ Thomæ Kempensis, cujus nomen perennius quam monumentum.' The cover of the sarcophagus is a raised slab of black marble, inscribed with the text: 'Que sequitur Me, non ambulat in tenebris.'

From this table rises a beautiful background of coloured sandstone. Standing well out in relief against the background is a superb group, admirably conceived and artistically executed in the most approved Dutch style of the fifteenth century, the period during which Thomas flourished and composed his golden work.

The central figure represents our Saviour staggering under the weight of His Cross, and bidding us take up our cross, and follow Him. His right hand is extended to à Kempis, who, in a kneeling posture, and clothed in the white habit of his order, receives and writes down the words of our Lord. Opposite to Thomas kneels the eternal bride of Christ, the Church, crowned and triumphant, directing the eyes of the

faithful towards their Divine Model. Behind Christ appear those whose names are for ever gloriously connected with the Passion of the Saviour. Mary and John, of course, are there ; Magdalene, also, with tearful eyes ; Nicodemus, who at last has found courage to throw off human respect ; the Centurion, who in the Crucified recognised the Son of God ; and Simon of Cyrene, who at first so reluctantly, and then so lovingly, bore the Cross after Jesus. Behind à Kempis stands his patron, St. Thomas the Apostle, and behind the Church triumphant her head, St. Peter. Then, beautiful Gothic spires shoot high into the air. In the central niche above is seen the Christus regnans, and grouped around Him stand the Fathers of the four great religious orders : on the right, St. Augustine and St. Benedict ; on the left, St. Francis and St. Dominic.

Altogether it is a monument worthy of the man in whose honour it has been raised, and higher praise it is impossible to bestow. Moreover, its interest and value are greatly enhanced by its cosmopolitan character ; by the fact that, in accordance with the happy idea of Canon Mulder and his able committee, this is an international monument to which men and women of every rank and condition in Church and State, from the Pope of Rome and the Queen Regent of Holland to the simple priest and the lowly peasant, of every creed and shade of opinion, and of every nation in Europe, have generously and lovingly contributed.

The Catholic will naturally inquire whether any miracles have been wrought through these relics to which such great honour is shown. Pastoor Waeyer,

the good priest to whose care they were first entrusted, records three out of many cases which came under his own observation, and for the truth of which he vouches. 'I have met with several persons,' he says, 'cured of toothache by his intercession. Moreover, in my chapel on several occasions a most sweet odour has been perceived by various trustworthy persons of both sexes, and by the whole congregation.'*

The third favour he attests is certainly most remarkable. In the summer of 1674 a pious maiden named Petronella Knapen, whose right hand was utterly withered and helpless, made a vow that if she was cured she would fast on the vigil and celebrate the Feast of à Kempis as a holiday of obligation by confession, communion, and refraining from servile work, as soon as he was canonized and a day should be dedicated to his honour by the Church. On November 6 in the same year the young girl went to confession, received Holy Communion, and then, in the presence of the reliquary, renewed her vow. From that moment her hand began to heal rapidly, and in a short time she was able to use it as freely as if it had never been diseased.

From the particulars of the vow made by this favoured client of the Venerable à Kempis, it is evident that the maiden herself, her confessor, Pastoor Waeyer, and, indeed, the whole Catholic population of the Netherlands at that time were looking forward with great confidence to the speedy canonization of him whose aid they so trustfully invoked. Nor were their hopes without good foundation. The Belgian Princess Isabelle was most earnest in her desire to

* Apud Amort, 'Deduct. Crit.,' p. 326.

see the holy man raised to the altars of the Church ; but, prevented by death, she was unable to take any steps to further the accomplishment of her wishes. Moreover, at that very time the Prince - Bishop Maximilian Hendrik was actually engaged in collecting materials for the documents necessary in the lengthy and tedious process of canonization. But, distracted by the wars that threatened his province, and carried off by death in A.D. 1688, he was permitted to do no more than begin the work. However, John Anthony Zunggo, a writer of the last century, assures us that these initial documents of the process of canonization were still extant in his day, preserved in the archives of the Archbishopric of Cologne ; but it is to be feared that, with so many other priceless manuscripts, they were lost, or destroyed, in the disturbances of the French Revolution.

Finally, as late as the eighteenth century, we find Eusebius Amort avowing that his intention in defending the claim of à Kempis to the authorship of the 'Imitation' was to prepare the way for his Beatification—'pro complananda ad ejus Beatificationem via.'*

However, the cause was never canonically opened, and we must console ourselves with the assurance that, at least in the eyes of the faithful, our Venerable Thomas has ever been numbered among the saints of God. For centuries the title of 'Venerable' has been his by common consent. Some grave authors have not scrupled to bestow upon him the epithet of 'Blessed.' Nay, quite recently, an Anglican clergyman, preaching on the symbolism of sacerdotal vestments, prefaced a quotation from the 'Following of

* Amort, 'Moralis Certitudo,' p. 118.

Christ' by referring to its author as 'St. Thomas à Kempis.'

However, may we not hope that now so much public honour has been paid to his sacred relics, and that now such publicity has been given to his holy life and writings, the day is not far distant when the cause of the beatification of Thomas à Kempis will be taken up in true earnest and carried to a successful issue? God grant it may be so!

APPENDIX

ICHOLAS CUSA, so called from the place of his birth—a small village on the banks of the Moselle, in the diocese of Treves—was born in the year of grace 1401, or, according to some, 1405. His father was a poor fisherman ; but early in life Nicholas was taken in hand by the Count of Mandercheidt, who, perceiving signs of remarkable ability in the lad, sent him to study at Deventer. Thence he proceeded to visit the most famous universities of Germany and Italy. At the age of twenty-two he received the cap of Doctor of Canon Law at Padua, and even then he was remarkable for his proficiency, not only in languages, as Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but in the sciences also, philosophy, mathematics, jurisprudence, history, and theology. Some time later he entered the priory of Canons Regular of St. Augustine at Tartemberg, and soon became Superior of the house, as we learn from a letter of his prefixed to his work on the Sonship of God. We next find him Dean of St. Florentin at Coblentz, and then Archdeacon of Liège. In this latter capacity he assisted at the Council of Bale. Eugene IV., hearing of his abilities, called him to Rome, and thence sent him as Ambassador to the Court of Constantinople, and after-

wards into Germany and France. Eugene's successor, Nicholas V., raised him to the purple with the title of St. Peter in Vincoli, and created him Bishop of Brixen in the Tyrol. The new Cardinal assisted at the opening of the Jubilee of 1450, and was then sent as Legate *a latere* to the Princes of Germany to make peace between them, and to turn their arms against Mahomet II. As the first act of his embassy, he published the indulgences of the Jubilee, and thereafter comported himself with such prudence, virtue, and disinterestedness that he won the esteem and veneration of all.

Nothing could be more simple than his equipage. He rode upon a mule. His household consisted of comparatively few domestics. His court was composed of men renowned for their piety and learning. Princes, prelates, and people vied with each other in doing him honour, and yet he seemed to become thereby only the more modest. He refused all presents offered to him, and wished his suite in this to follow his example. So thoroughly did he win the love and respect of the Germans on this occasion that he was again appointed Ambassador to them by Calixtus II. and Pius II. The latter did his utmost to reconcile him with the Archduke Sigismund of Austria, who had first opposed his appointment to the See of Brixen, and who was now quarrelling with him over a monastery into which the prelate wished to introduce some salutary reforms. The Prince went so far as to throw Nicholas into prison; but the public celebration of the Divine worship ceased almost immediately throughout his diocese, and Sigismund himself was excommunicated by Calixtus III., where-

upon he consented to release him, only, however, on the most iniquitous terms. Restored to his flock, this holy and learned prelate died some years later at Toidi, A.D. 1454 or 1464. His body was carried to Rome and laid in the Church of St. Peter in Vincoli, of which he had been a most generous benefactor, and there his tomb may be seen to this day. His works, comprising treatises mystic, devotional, critical, and scientific, were published in three volumes at Bâle, A.D. 1565. In 1730 the Jesuit Father Gaspard Hartzheim published at Treves an elegant Latin biography of this remarkable man, and therein he gives him the credit of having renewed the Pythagorean hypothesis of the motion of the earth round the sun ; but his efforts in making the world of letters accept this theory met with little success. That task was reserved for Copernicus and Galileo.

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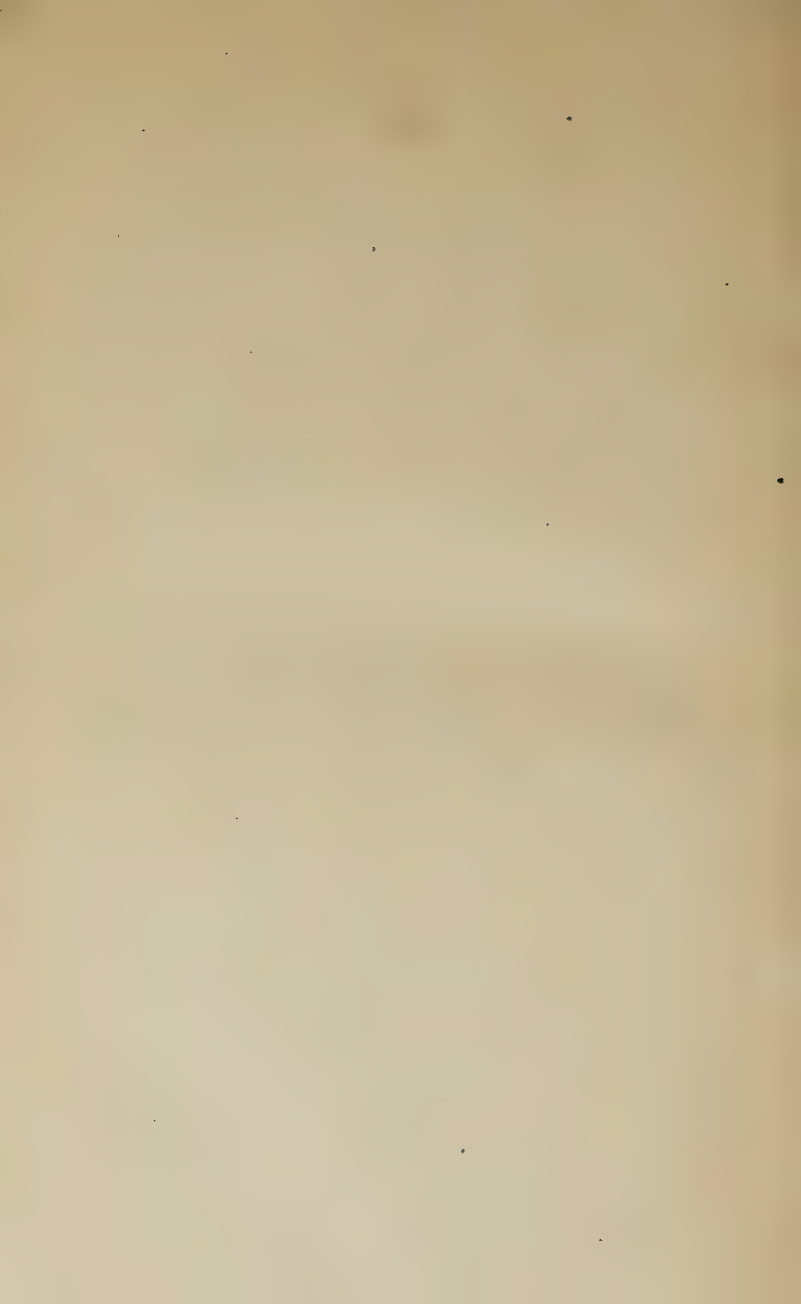
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THE END



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